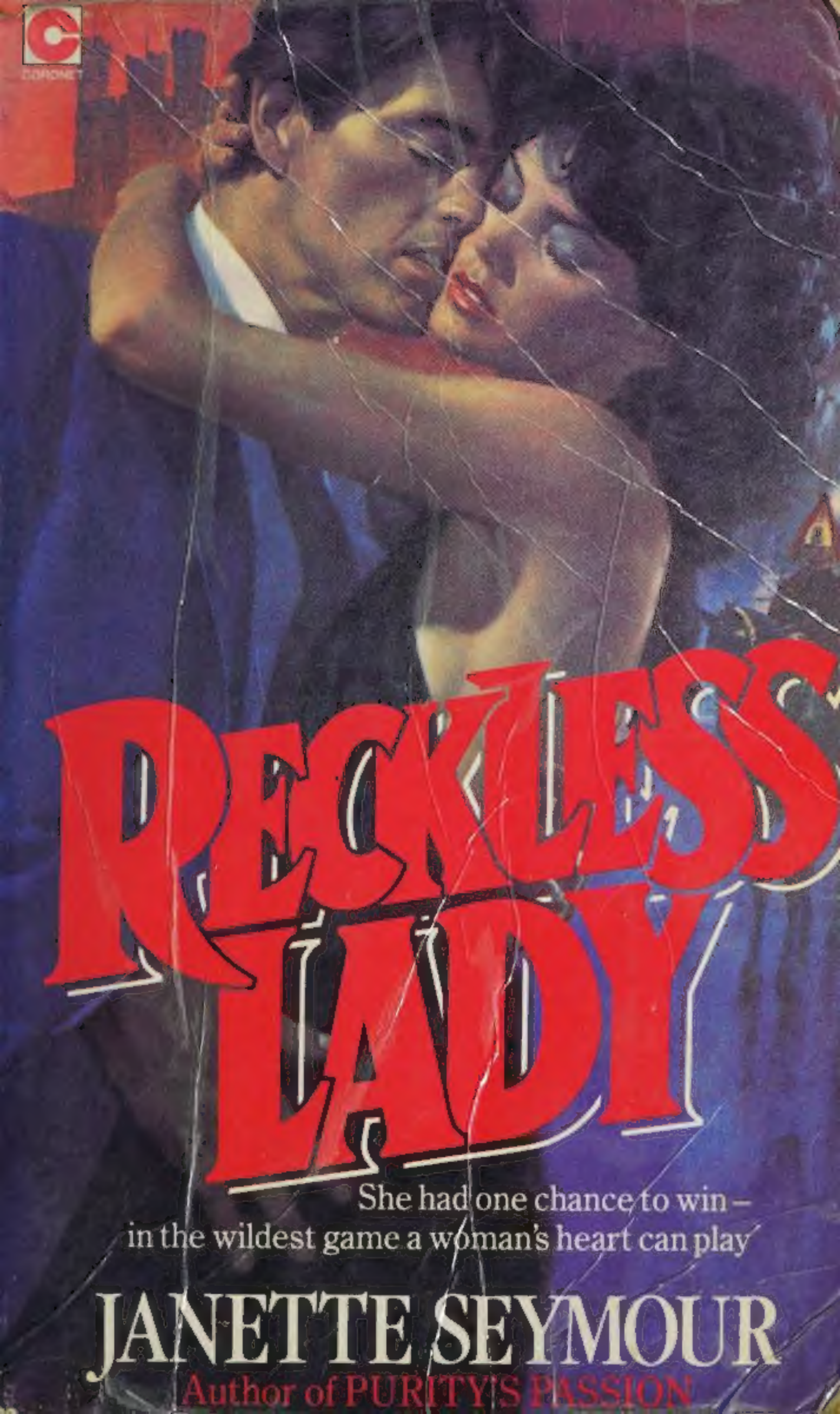
RECKLESS LADY
She had one chance to win –
in the wildest game a woman's heart can play
JANETTE SEYMOUR
Author of PURITY'S PASSION

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RECKLESS LADY

The water was like liquid air . . .

She dived deep, touched the bottom with her extended hands to check herself and looked about her. His solitary nude form was approaching her, chest almost brushing the sand, hair streaming behind him as in a high wind, legs kicking slowly and powerfully.

Suzanne waited for him to close in on her; stood up, touching the floor of the lagoon with one toe to steady herself against the current; raised her hands to free her hair and let it trail in abandonment; consciously triumphant of her radiant nudity, her animal attraction for the male she had chosen for herself alone.

His leading hand came out and imprisoned her slender middle, the other closed about the back of her head and brought her mouth against his. They met, body to body, mouth to mouth, so that she could feel his heart pulsating against the peak of her breast . . .

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Reckless Lady

Janette Seymour

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Hodder and Stoughton

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PART I

The Awakening

Chapter 1

"Suzanne somebody's coming!"

"I don't care."

"Don't you think that maybe we should put our clothes on?"

"Why bother? The door's locked, isn't it? What a chicken you are."

"All right for you—I've got my job to think of."

Yes, he had that, thought Suzanne. Though not even the faculty of the College would, in this permissive age, fire a male model for laying one of the postgraduate students in the Antique Room. In the front hall, maybe Or in the refectory But the Antique Room -why, it was the thing to get laid in the Antique Room. She had an impulse to giggle.

"It's one of the janitors," said Freddie. "He'll try the door "

"It won't get him anywhere," said Suzanne. "The key's in the lock on this side. Let him go hang. Kiss me, Freddie. Kiss me -here . . ." She offered her pert young left breast to him and sighed as his lips closed about her questing nipple. The door rattled and the handle turned. Over the smoothly muscled slope of Freddie Hopwood's back, she saw a peak-capped silhouette behind the frosted glass of the door panel; saw it pause irresolutely and turn to go.

As Freddie's ardor increased, Suzanne's own diminished in direct ratio Her idle eye fell upon the tumbled clothing they had lightheartedly draped over the plaster figures: her panties she had pulled over the head of Diocletian; Freddie had put her bra on Venus de Milo ("Room for two more inside!"); her academic cap and gown nobly graced a leering faun. For today was graduation. Upstairs in the great hall, the young hopefuls—and the not-so-young hopefuls—were assembled to receive the scraps of simulated parchment that would declare them to be

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Doctors of Philosophy, Masters of Art, Masters of Design: passports to the higher echelons of industrial design, of teaching particularly of teaching Alone of all her class, Suzanne already had a considerable acclaim as a painter When her wry, shrewd portrait of the Master of a Cambridge college was shown at the Royal Academy, it had been hailed by the leading critics of the snob Sunday press. Her seminude of a fading screen siren, exhibited in a Bond Street gallery, had been a *succès de scandale* and had quite reversed the opinions of the Sunday press pundits And she was still only twenty-two.

Freddie was breathing heavily against her ear, his fingers doing wonderful things with the small of her back, at the base of her spine, things that usually drove her wild, so that her body would heave and thrash, matching his ardor But today it seemed necessary and obliging to simulate a little excitement She was really quite fond of Freddie, and it was a half-amusing idea to hitchhike with him across France in September, sleeping in a two man tent, bathing in rivers in the dawn, eating fresh bread, cheese and pate, quaffing raw red wine from bottles. Amusing but quite impractical, Daddy would never allow it.

Daddy . . .

The only thing in her whole life about which she had been really serious, really devoted, had been her time at the College. She was to receive a major prize and was sure her father couldn't have thought of anything more important to do than to come and see his only child honored and acclaimed

A note, delivered by special messenger ten minutes before the presentation began, read *"Regret can't make it today. Good luck Daddy"* She had run out of the great hall in tears, bundling her cap and gown into a heap in the corner of the Antique Room, where she had spent so many absorbed hours with her drawing She had thought, the hell with their bloody degree and their bloody prize let them send the damn things through the post.

Freddie Hopwood had found her there Freddie, whose profile was carved by Praxiteles, whose classic body was nurtured, surely, on the ancient Attic shore, and who had drunk the wine of Parnassus in a past existence He was a model who sat for many top flight painters and sculptors and was a bisexual like so many of the other models. Suzanne's thoughts drifted back to last New Year, when Freddie and a score of roistering students and models had assembled on the patio of an outrageous new building erected by a flourishing corporation. The center

piece was a neoclassical male nude—modeled by Freddie Hopwood and clearly recognizable as such—pouring an eternal jet of water from a conch shell into a goldfish pond. Yelling, whooping, they had all stripped and climbed into the pond and adorned the statue's private parts with paper flower garlands.

Freddie was mounting to his climax, his mind a thousand miles away from hers. Suzanne tenderly stroked his bowed, flaxen-curled head and whispered to him, "Yes, yes," the way one might coax a dying person into easeful oblivion.

When it was over, he lay still, his face pillowed against her breasts. As she lay there, she could hear, from afar, the sound of politely restrained clapping. The presentations must be over, the speeches done. Nothing left on the dais but the scroll inscribed to Suzanne Garbisian, Master of Arts, and the Prize for Painting—a quite handsome check that could still take her and Freddie Hopwood through France and beyond for the rest of the year.

Damn you, Daddy, for letting me down on this, the *only* thing I've ever done in my life that really cost me anything . . .

Freddie stirred. Finding himself where he was, he gave a small moan of pleasure and addressed his lips to the quiescent nipple that lay against his cheek, summoning it to erection and at the same time sliding his hands over her shapely hips to encompass her taut buttocks.

Suzanne brushed aside his hands and sat up sharply.

"Down, Fido!" she said "I've got a million things to do this afternoon, including a full scale row with my father that's not going to be very nice." She swung herself off the upholstered model throne where they had made love and walked, taut-flanked and breasts stiffly jouncing, to the row of plaster heads on the shelf beyond. She snatched up her panties from the head of the Roman emperor and snapped them over her thighs.

"Lunch with me," he said. "Pint of beer and a ham sandwich down at the pub."

"Nothing I'd like better, love," responded Suzanne, "but that isn't on either."

"You're a slave to that old man of yours," declared Freddie.

"What a silly thing to say," replied Suzanne, "but I'm stuck with him because I'm all he's got. Fasten my bra strap, please. No, don't start anything else; I've told you I have to go."

Students were still milling around in Exhibition Road when she got out into the sudden sunshine: everyone in their hoods

and gowns, clutching their scrolls of imitation parchment, they and their spouses, parents and friends. Scarcely anyone noticed Suzanne: a medium-sized girl with sweeping black hair and bowed head, scruffy, patched jeans, scuffed sneakers. Someone called out, "Hi, Suze—what happened to you?" She made no reply but walked swiftly on up toward Knightsbridge.

A quartette of street musicians strolled along the gutter old jazzmen, horn, clarinet, guitar and drum They knew Suzanne by sight and she them; indeed, they had played at junior common-room dances She slipped a coin into a proffered hat and went on her way, deaf to their shy gallantries

Where do I go from here? she thought. Do I break with Daddy? I could just about scrape a living with the painting, and that means everything to me. But if I shook myself free of Daddy, would I then shake him free of me? And what hope, ever, of getting truly free from him without the independence that comes from marriage or a hugely successful career?

She found herself stepping over the lines of the paving stones, which she always regarded as a sign of moral weakness, like believing in palmistry and astrology, so she corrected the fault by raising her eyes. An incoming jetliner, shaping course for Heathrow, came down through a wisp of cloud, right over the tall tower of a hotel bordering the park.

The doorman of the hotel—the senior one of the three, who was almost always in attendance: frock coated, top-hatted, gloved, alert—took her in as she approached, and thought, not for the first time, how he would throw everything in—missus, kids and all—for a smashing young bird like that, even forgetting that particular bird's special advantages

"Morning, Miss Garbisian," he said, touching his hat brim.

"Hello, Charlie Say, do I owe you some money?"

"Eight pounds, Miss Garbisian," came the bland reply, delivered with the disparaging smile of a man who knows where credit is good. "That was for last night's taxi, miss."

"Remind me some time, will you, Charlie?"

"Yes, Miss Garbisian Thank you, Miss Garbisian "

His two aides rushed to assist her through the revolving plate glass doors, as if she did not have the ability to turn them herself.

Suzanne descended the thickly carpeted steps into the main hall, past turbaned Arabs seated around glass-topped coffee tables with their worry beads and their vehement cross-talk, past well-coiffured matrons and their paunchy husbands, all of

whom turned to regard the shapely creature in patched jeans with affront or lust, according to sex and inclinations; till she came to the door of the private elevator to the penthouse suite, which she opened with her own key.

A swift ascent to the penthouse, where her maid Alice was waiting. Alice was in her midthirties, with the remains of a once considerable beauty still apparent in her face and figure. She had been Suzanne's mother's personal lady's maid in the old days, traveling with her American mistress from London to Paris, Paris to Capri, Rome, Venice, Honolulu, to the villa on Corfu, 'round-the-world cruises in the yacht *Beguine*, sometimes with the master accompanying them but more often not. Alice had learned a lot along the way With the death of Faye Garbisian, she had attached herself to the daughter and had become her confidante, older sister, friend, masseuse and occasional lover.

"How was it, dear?" she asked, as Suzanne swung into the open terrace complete with swimming pool, kicking off her sneakers with such force that they bounded off the white and silver paneled wall. Knowing her young mistress as she did, Alice knew the ceremony had not gone well.

"My bloody father didn't turn up," responded Suzanne. "But then I should have known he'd cancel at the last minute. I've a mind to do the same to him and not show up at his thing this afternoon."

Alice saw the danger signals of another blazing row between father and daughter, which always ended badly with a patched-up truce and the relationship further soured.

"Don't think of it right now, dear," said the maid. "I've fixed you some lunch: a chicken curry followed by blackberry cheesecake. How's that? Like a drink now?"

"Give me a Bacardi and Coke, Alice, and stroke my neck the way only you can do." Suzanne flopped down on the vast Knole sofa and stretched out her legs, closing her eyes.

The maid fixed a drink and set it on a small table at her mistress's elbow. Coming up behind, she unfastened Suzanne's shirt at the neck and drew it back over the smooth shoulders, baring the delicate structure of her deeply cleft upper back. And then, with a touch as light as flickering eyelashes, she massaged the side of the slender neck, increasing the pressure as she teased out the firm muscle encompassing the upper spine. Suzanne reached out for her glass, took a deep sip and gave a low moan of pleasure.

"Better already, dear?" questioned Alice softly.

"Mmmmm. What time did you order lunch for?"

"No time at all. I didn't know when you'd be in, and curry will keep. Shall I carry on, dear?"

"Mmmm, yes. Do me—all over." Suzanne unbuttoned and shrugged out of her shirt and bra, kicked off her jeans and panties and eased herself flat upon the long sofa

"Get undressed, too, Alice, and we'll both have a swim afterward," murmured Suzanne, gazing up at her, almond-shaped eyes slanting.

"Yes, dear." Like always, Alice experienced a tightening of the throat, a quickening of breath, as she regarded the shapely, firm, tanned body lying beneath her hands, with its erect nipples, the dab of sable at the loins, arms pillowed behind the sweep of hair like a raven's wing. Her fingers trembled as she divested herself of her own clothing, leaving herself entirely nude like her companion, but with breasts and hips that were generous as a rose in full bloom, in heartrending contrast to the newly awakened bud lying beneath her.

Suzanne closed her eyes and gave herself over to the touch of hands and lips. It had always been this way with her and Alice, the older woman had always had the power, since Mummy's death, to raise her to a different plane of consciousness, to soothe away the cares of the world, the cares of being the only child of one of the world's richest tycoons She had never given any thought to the unconventional relationship between mistress and maid, since what occasionally took place between them had no extension into her everyday life outside the confines of the hothouse atmosphere in which, as Aram Garbisian's daughter, she was compelled to exist.

She moaned with pleasure as the maid's ministrations upon her nude body became, through a massage of the general sort, ever more erotic, till, unable to endure any further delay, she reached up her slender arms and drew the woman's lips to meet her lips, to allow the full breasts to press upon hers.

From the bottom of the pool, she could see, by kicking with her legs and rolling on her back, the wavering lines of the French windows that looked out on the penthouse garden Above her, Alice's pale, nude form glided across the surface, arms and legs performing a slow, lazy stroke, the matured body displayed, in motion, to its very considerable advantage Suz-

anne kicked against the bottom of the pool, sending herself toward the surface, till she was able to reach out and, taking Alice by the quite surprisingly slim and supple waist, draw the maid to her. They embraced wetly, lips seeking each other out.

"You're a funny child, little Suzanne," said the older woman. "What are you looking for out of life? Not me, that's for sure."

"I do not seek, I find," responded Suzanne. "Don't worry about me, Alice. I'm Thursday's child, with a long way to go, and you're a cool, friendly place where I can rest along the way. And now, dear Alice" kissing the other's nose—"you can tell them to bring my lunch. And a bottle of wine. I must fortify myself against the arrival of my dreadful father!"

The exigencies of the hotel urgently demanded that no less than a maître d' and four waiters were required to serve a simple meal of curry followed by a cheesecake to one young woman. The meal was brought in upon a trolley that could have borne a side of beef and all the trimmings and was lovingly transferred to Suzanne's gold rimmed dinner plate by spoon and fork. The sauces and Indian-style side dishes chutneys of all kinds, chopped chillies, grated coconut, dhal, chapattis—required the attention of two waiters. The serving of the champagne called for the additional presence of the sommelier of the penthouse kitchen, who, opening the bottle of Krug and tasting it in his little silver beaker, declared it to be excellent but deferred to Madame's opinion; and watched with unconcealed anxiety as the exquisite creature in the Chinese silk dressing gown stirred the pale wine with a swizzle stick, took a sip and said it was okay.

Luncheon over, Suzanne delved into the battered plastic shoulder bag that she carried to College and took out her sketch book, which was her constant companion, her love and joy, flipped over the pages and scanned the work within.

A rainy morning in Kensington Gore, with scurrying figures under black umbrellas, a nanny hastening a perambulator; the professor of painting, sitting very stiff-faced, who had asked for the drawing and had been refused, studies of models in repose during their rest periods when most of the other students went out into the courtyard for a smoke while they planned their future social arrangements; studies of Freddie lots of him, head and shoulders and full length nude.

They were good. Everyone said her work was brilliant. That

was the answer, and she would tackle Daddy this very afternoon No row, no repining She would gloss over Daddy's heartless defection, pretend it hadn't really mattered, and then present him with her proposition she should move to Paris; not to that hideous, barracklike mansion in the rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, which smelt of mice and was hung with fake Watteaus and Bouchiers palmed on to Daddy by a crook of a New York dealer when he was buying pictures by the yard, but to the tight little flat on a top story of the most rackety building in the rue de Bac on the Left Bank. The flat that had been Mummy's inspiration, her private place to which she could slip away and paint a little, cook for herself for a change, be herself and not merely a beautiful appendage to Aram Garbisian, along with the yachts, the racehorses, the islands, the homes all over the world . . .

The thought of her mother tore at Suzanne's heart

Would Daddy let her go? She doubted it The Royal College he had accepted with a surly grace, since she was in a sense *institutionalized* there, just as she was in the penthouse apartment suite of the hotel of which he was the majority shareholder. In Paris, in the walk-up flat in the rue du Bac, she would be free.

It was worth trying She laid aside her sketchbook with a sigh What did freedom mean to her? Not a license to licentiousness, certainly, Freddie Hopwood and the rest, they were nothing but cool and friendly places where one rested along the way She had never been in love whatever that was— with any man, or woman, for that matter To be the daughter of Aram Garbisian, living in the massive shadow of his personality, precluded one from any relationship save of the most ephemeral kind.

Paris would be different. Painting and living. Away from the shadow of Daddy who, associating the City of Light with his dead wife, never went near the place except if there was a fortune to be won or lost In Paris, perhaps, happy with her painting and free of the burden that she had carried with her all her life, she might break out of this carapace and find herself She might even find . . . love.

"Time to get ready, dear Here's the dress. Like it?" Alice broke into her reverie, carrying the garment on a hanger It was a Givenchy wrapped tunic dress in large printed sunflowers over white And there was a wide straw hat to go with it Suzanne nodded without enthusiasm and mischievously thought

of accompanying her father that afternoon in her patched jeans, maybe barefoot. She laughed:

"The hairdresser's here and the manicurist," said Alice. "And the man from Helena Rubinstein's who's going to do your makeup."

"Bring on the troops," said Suzanne resignedly.

Aram Garbisian arrived at the hotel in his gold-plated Rolls Royce Corniche, feeling uncomfortable in the swallow-tailed morning coat that emphasized his squat appearance and made him look like a penguin.

Garbisian was sensitive about his lack of inches, though it was to his small size that he owed his continued existence. He was the son of an Armenian accountant, born in Constantinople—now Istanbul—the seventh, youngest and only male sibling. Little Aram and his family and his entire nation dwelling within the bounds of the then Turkish empire, all 1,750,000 of them, were deported to Syria and Mesopotamia in 1915. One-and-three-quarters million men, women and children were forced to march on foot through a thousand miles of desert and mountain, in the broiling heat of the Middle East summer and in the snows and howling gales of winter. Guarding them, lashing them on, were Turkish irregulars, who every night sought out young and pretty women and girls for their brutal sport. One night they came upon the Garbisians huddled together on the mountain trail. There was no escape, for though Madame Garbisian had shorn her daughters' hair close and smeared their faces with muck, in an attempt to hide their comeliness, they remained six intractably beautiful girls ranging from nine to eighteen. There was no place to hide save a narrow cleft in the rocky hillside, scarcely room for a lamb, and it was into this that little Aram's mother thrust her son, with an admonition to keep quiet—for even a five-year-old boy was not safe from the barbaric lust of the *bashi-bazouks*.

Tiny, shivering, the child was witness to the savageries inflicted upon his mother and six sisters, and to the punishment meted out to his father for presuming to interfere. Next morning, when the forced march was resumed, seven despoiled bodies were left behind on that mountain pass for the vultures to pick clean. Little Aram led his father, now blinded and with severed hands tied around his neck, to Syria . . .

"Mr Garbisian! Good afternoon, sir. Such a pleasure and honor!" The general manager of the hotel, together with the

undermanager, assistant managers and the *chef de cuisine*, was in the main hall to greet the tycoon's arrival.

Aram Garbisian chewed his cigar to the corner of his mouth. "That porter out there," he said "Trod on my foot as I got out of the car What d'you think of that, eh?"

Immediate consternation among the hotel top brass. "Do you know anything about this, Tomkins?" demanded the general manager of the undermanager, with the manner of one interrogating the suspected member of a conspiracy to overthrow ordered society.

"I—I think I may shed some light, sir," responded the wretched Tomkins "The young porter in question may well be one of the new fellows taken on only this week."

"Get rid of him!" growled the tycoon

"Yes, Mr. Garbisian!"

"Where's my daughter why isn't she down here ready for me?"

"Miss Suzanne, as I understand, is on her way down now, Mr. Garbisian."

"It's ten to three—right?"

"Yes, Mr. Garbisian."

"The garden party begins at three."

"Yessir!"

"My instructions to you were for my daughter to be escorted down here to await my arrival at ten minutes of three sharp."

Before the baleful gaze of the stocky, berry-black eyed old man behind the big cigar, the general manager shriveled like a live oyster squirted with lemon. A top executive of the group, with twenty seven years' service, an engraved salver to mark the twenty-fifth, an assured seat on the board of directors to pave his way to retirement all these solid properties, he saw in a flash of sudden enlightenment, were as transient as water held in the hand Happily for him, his dilemma and the need to make an answer were solved by the opening of the private penthouse elevator and the appearance of Suzanne Garbisian

If the old man was affected by her stunning looks, he made a good show of concealing it Taking his cigar from his mouth, he presented his pockmarked cheek for his daughter to kiss The rest of the main hall—the general manager, the desk staff, the milling guests, the Arabs, most of whom had been witness to the multimillionaire's tirade—were subject to a sudden and awesome silence as the vision in the sunflower dress and wide

straw hat stalked, cat-like, across the richly carpeted floor toward her father, followed by, surrounded by hairdresser, makeup artist, lady's maid, all plucking at details of her dress, hairdo, *maquillage*.

"Hello, Daddy." She pecked his cheek.

"Girl, we're late. Let's go."

The general manager found his voice. "Good afternoon, Mr. Garbisian. Such an honor. Enjoy the party. And you, Miss Suzanne. And I—that is, the staff of the hotel—hope that . . ." His voice tailed away as the stocky figure swept out of the plate glass doors with his beautiful daughter at his heels.

The Rolls-Royce's door clunked discreetly closed. Garbisian relaxed in his seat. "Well?" he said. It was a question, all right.

"Well what?" Suzanne, from long experience, began assembling her mental defenses against assault from any direction he might attempt.

"Don't tell me you didn't see the gossip column in the *Courier* last night," said her father. He picked up the voicepipe to the chauffeur. "Drive around the block a coupla times, Nubar. There's a traffic jam here and I don't see all that much advantage to spending the whole afternoon in line."

"Yes, sir," came the response.

"Well, what have you got to say about it, girl?" demanded the tycoon, switching his attention back to Suzanne.

"I didn't see it," responded Suzanne wearily. "I don't read that filth. You know that creep of a columnist has got it in for me on account of you. What did you ever do to get so far up his nose?" she demanded accusingly, on the principle of carrying the battle into the enemy's lines.

"I fired the bastard someplace along the way," said her father. "But that's not the point. If Caesar's wife must be above suspicion, so must Garbisian's daughter." He wagged a heavy, beringed finger under her shapely, Hittite nose. "And you ain't gone halfway to that, girl."

"What I do with my private life is my business," breathed Suzanne.

"Like hell it is!" exclaimed the other. "Is it your business, then, when every little shopgirl in Britain, every little two-bit creep, is sniggering over how they hung up your brassiere in that low-down discotheque the other week?"

"It was a matter of expediency," said Suzanne. "They wanted

to hang up a brassiere, and I happened to be the only girl present wearing a bra."

"There you go again!" raged the tycoon. "Talking smart to your own father. And all I've done for you!"

"Like *not* coming to graduation this morning, Daddy," responded Suzanne in a voice as flat as Norfolk, as chill, as unaccommodating.

He did not respond. The multimillionaire's heavy face was suffused with choleric puce, and not for the first time Suzanne dreaded that he would have a coronary right there before her eyes. "I was in Wall Street last week, and these schmucks are coming up to me and saying things like, 'I hear your daughter's topping the league for corespondents in England,' and 'What gives with this story about your kid painting this British cabinet minister in the nude?' How do you think I feel, girl? And then—to end it all—last night . . ." He hit his flat brow with the palm of his hand and hunched his shoulders.

"What did they say about me last night? I never saw it," said Suzanne.

"It will wait," declared her father, reaching for the voicepipe again. "Nubar, try getting into this gate here, right behind the Rolls Royce bearing the flag. They must be desirable folks."

"Yes, sir."

"Daddy, I want to go to Paris, to set up as a painter. At the flat in the rue du Bac." She delivered it all in a mouthful, there was no other way she could have done it.

Aram Garbisian had not achieved his present eminence by being taken unawares by a ball thrown from out of the blue. He responded by relighting his cigar, narrowing his eyes against the rich, aromatic smoke, and dipping into the crocodile skin briefcase that never left his side, taking out a sheaf of papers, a pair of spectacles and a gold ball point pen. Laying the briefcase on Suzanne's knees like a desk-top, he thrust the pen in her fingers and pointed to the uppermost paper.

"Sign there," he ordered. "And there, and there. And initial it there, there and there."

She obeyed. "Durable Assets Holding Company!" she said. "I never heard of Durable Assets Holding Company. Why do *I* sign it, for heaven's sake?"

"As of tomorrow, you are Chairman and major shareholder," replied her father, shuffling through the papers. "Now sign this one. Three copies . . ."

Numbly, she obeyed. Hopeless—it was hopeless! He would never let her go, and there was more to it than possessiveness; she was useful to him in a hundred ways, as a silent partner in various of his enterprises (Suzanne Garbisian, M.A., A.R.C.A., looked well on letterheads and prospectuses), occasional hostess, companion at the ballet and the opera and at such junkets as this afternoon's affair. He would never let her go—and he did not think she dared to cut loose from him, certain the fall from his nest would be too terrifying for the pampered fledgling that she was.

"We'll forget last night's gossip item," said her father, slipping the documents back into his briefcase. "We'll forget what you said just now. Attend to me, girl. Your best option is to marry. Forget any idea of supporting yourself by painting. Painting's a great little hobby for a married woman with plenty of time on her hands. Listen—I'll find you some nice young guy when I'm over in the States next week. Don't look surprised. The list of nice young guys who'd marry a girl with the Garbisian price tag on her includes practically every eligible male in the social register, even though that girl has been working the clock round in an attempt to get herself a reputation to match up with Catherine the Great, or Messalina, maybe. What was that you said?"

"Nothing," responded Suzanne dully, staring out of the window and blinking away a tear. So that was his plan: marriage. She was to be sold to the sprig of one of Daddy's fellow tycoons, no doubt to cement two dynasties, create another clutch of companies in the endless roundelay of merger and asset-stripping, making and breaking, high-level wheeling and dealing that comprised her father's life.

Unexpectedly, his pudgy hand reached out to take her own pale olive, slender fingers and squeeze them. She gave a start, stared at him and was shocked—and a little embarrassed—to see that his eyes were brimming with tears also.

"Remember that you're my little girl," he said throatily. "My only child. I've stacked a lot of chips on you, Suzanne. My own father"—he looked away—"saw all his hopes go in one night. I don't want to . . . I'd hate like hell to . . ." His voice tailed away.

She knew all about the March to Syria, for it was part of the warp and weft, a bloody strand in the fabric of their lost nation. She had overheard Daddy recount his own horror of

the event many times, in great detail She was still unable to reach out and make contact with him, even knowing how his experiences must have shaped the man from the child.

"I wonder if the Queen will speak to us this afternoon, Daddy," she said in a high, neutral voice.

Buckingham Palace garden parties usually take place in the summertime on Tuesdays and Thursdays at three o'clock in the afternoon till about six, at which times they create total traffic jams in entire central London

Although Mr. Garbisian had never before been honored by an invitation, he had taken counsel on the form and learned his best option, which was to dismiss his chauffeur at the Queen Victoria monument opposite the main gates and walk through the slow-moving, triple-banked traffic jam. Soon he and Suzanne were strolling in the cool shade of the garden to the strains of a Foot Guards' band playing selections from *My Fair Lady*.

"Would you like some food?" he asked her.

"I've just eaten."

"I'd like a drink There'll be champagne, of course," said Garbisian.

There was not. Britain's most respected family does not hold its place by dispensing wines and liquors to all and sundry in a midweek midafternoon There was tea in plenty, dispensed from hissing urns, thin cucumber sandwiches, slivers of bread rolled around pâté, crab meat, cream cheese and the like. All set on long tables, not tremendously smart. The sort of thing one would see at a county show — no better.

Suzanne stole a glance at the tiny watch set in her diamond bracelet In two and three quarters hours, give or take half an hour or so, it would be over and she would be back in the hotel, where a lazy evening beckoned, with maybe a dip in the pool and a few drinks, time to mourn over another lost dream.

"And this is my daughter, Colonel " Father was talking to a tall, distinguished looking man of military bearing, dressed in the ubiquitous morning suit, with a dark red carnation in the buttonhole. Gray hair slicked in wings over each ear, clipped moustache with not a hair unaligned and pale blue eyes that swam over her figure, no doubt speculating (correctly, as it turned out) that the Givenchy dress was so sheer, so snugly fitting about the hips and the bosom, as to preclude the wearing of anything underneath.

"Suzanne, this is Colonel Frobish of the Royal Household," said her father.

"How do you do, Colonel." She gave him her hand, and with a formal bow he brought his bronzed face and pouchy blue eyes very close to her bosom.

"Delighted, Miss Garbisian. Have you met Her Majesty?"

"No, I haven't," said Suzanne.

"The Colonel's been telling me that the Queen will certainly stop by and speak to us, girl," declared her father.

Frobish stroked his moustache and allowed himself another comprehensive gaze over Suzanne's assembled charms so lightly draped by the sunflower dress. "It has been arranged," he murmured. "Quite impossible, of course, for Her Majesty to address more than a representative handful of the guests present, but you, sir, will be singled out for the—er—honor." He nodded and looked wise, saw someone on the edge of his vision, focused, beamed. "Ah, have you met Cy Delamere?" he murmured. "If not, I will be happy to introduce you."

Garbisian looked interested. Suzanne knew the signs. Her father was registering animation for a man—or a woman who might conceivably be of assistance to the furtherance of his interests, then or at any future time. She experienced a quite unexpected prickle of—what? excitement, coupled with something else that might have been unease. She turned to see a tall man in morning suit striding across the smooth green lawn toward them, with a woman trailing close behind. Suzanne had no eyes for the woman.

"Ah, Delamere, how nice to see you," said the Colonel. "I don't think you've met my friend Mr Garbisian . . ."

Of course, everyone knew of Cy Delamere. He was the whiz kid of international publishing, successor to a failing newspaper empire, now built up into a conglomerate that stretched across three continents. He was also a former fighter pilot and war hero, recipient of the highest decorations that his country could bestow. Although born in the United States, Delamere was a citizen of the World and was tipped for an honorary British knighthood for his inestimable services to Fleet Street. A film of his ghosted war autobiography was currently being shot on location in Southeast Asia and had already received an entirely fortuitous advance publicity boost from the fact that the director of the second unit had been bitten by a king cobra and had died of it.

Suzanne had seen him in innumerable newspaper and magazine pictures and on TV talk shows She experienced that odd sense of *déjà vu* that comes from meeting a famous face incarnate. At close quarters, she could see that the taut, bronzed skin of his face was grazed by a fine radiation of lines emanating from the corners of the eyes—and surely this was a sign of good humor? There was also a deep line scored down each cheek, as if the sculptor had had second thoughts and decided that his creation's amiability should be moderated by—what? A towering bad temper?

He was looking at her quizzically from under a raised eyebrow They were all looking at her Delamere's female companion, an ice-cold blonde, was regarding her with a palpable sneer of contempt Suzanne realized that Delamere had just been introduced to her and that she had been caught in the act of staring at him like some silly, smitten schoolgirl.

She held out her hand He took it Even through her glove, she could feel the taut strength and coolness of his grasp.

"Haven't we met before?" His voice was a deeply inflected growl, and all male "Your face is very familiar, Miss Garbisian."

"I I think not," she whispered, agonizingly aware that her cheeks were flaming, that the other woman was aware of it also.

"This is Nadia Nielsen," he said, indicating his companion

"How do you do?"

"How do you do?"

Neither she nor Nadia Nielsen offered a hand to the other A moment's awkward silence was broken by Colonel Frobish.

"Ah, the moment approaches Here come the Royals "

There was a glint of shifting light from the panes of a tall French window as it opened and a group of people emerged, led by a slight figure in pale blue At the sight of her those upon the lawns below surged forward and became part of a hollow square that was discreetly shaped by functionaries in attendance to provide the Royal party with a space to walk around in.

Frobish murmured in Suzanne's ear and found it necessary to lay his hand lightly upon her hip in order to do so "There's Philip and the Queen Mum The Prince and Princess of Wales aren't here today He so often isn't nowadays And there's Princess Margaret The Queen, you see, is going one way with

her entourage, the Queen Mum, the other. Division of labor, ha-ha! My dear, you must give me your phone number before you leave here."

Having descended the steps into the garden, the two groups of figures parted company and began a slow circuit of the hollow square. It was immediately apparent that the Queen's party would reach where Suzanne stood in a very short time. She glanced sidelong at her father Garbisian seemed to have grown in stature. He stood like a monolith, his craggy jaw thrust out, his berry-black eyes hooded, hands clasped in the attitude of prayer. On her other side, beyond Colonel Frobish, was the magnetic Cy Delamere and the Nadia Nielsen creature. She had an urge to steal a glance at Delamere but decided against it. Instead, she thought: he must be about forty, perhaps a bit more. And I wonder if he's sleeping with the Nielsen woman She's very beautiful, but no chicken. Thirty-two or three? Something like that . . .

The Royal party drew closer Many of the Queen's pauses were signaled by an exceedingly handsome man at her elbow, another Colonel Frobish, who from time to time commended some person or other to Her Majesty's attention. A brief question-and-answer exchange, followed by a smile, a nod, and the trim figure in pale blue passed on her way

The murmurs of voices grew louder, more audible . .

"Ma'am, this is Mr Henry Gorst, author of the book you enjoyed so much."

"Ah, yes. What are you writing at the moment, Mr. Gorst?"

Aram Garbisian relaxed his posture, allowing his hands to fall to his sides. He waited, eyes fixed before him. What a long way he was from that night of horror on the Anatolian mountain pass. He was an alien, without a country, but was about to exchange light chat with a Queen Regent of a thousand-year dynasty.

"And this, Ma'am, is Mr. Aram Garbisian, whom Your Majesty will recall from your conversation with the Prime Minister yesterday."

"Of course How do you do, Mr Garbisian?" The tycoon saw a white-gloved hand reach out toward him and took it wonderingly. "Your arrangements are satisfactorily concluded?"

"Yes, Ma'am," murmured Garbisian.

"So I was informed Do you live in England?"

"Some of the time, Ma'am."

"And at other times?"

"In New York, Ma'am. Sometimes in Corfu, or Monte Carlo. Ma'am"—indicating Suzanne—"may I introduce my . . ."

"Lucky you, Mr. Garbisian, to have the opportunities for travel."

A nod and a smile. The blue-eyed gaze panned across Suzanne, gave a flicker of recognition to see Colonel Frobish, lit upon the tall figure next to him.

"Ah, Mr Delamere How are all your newspapers?"

The Queen retired back into the palace, and the guests dispersed, some to the buffet tables, others to explore the secrets of London's finest and most private garden The center of gravity had departed with the Sovereign, and all that remained was a crowd of rubbernecks who, having done no more than catch a glimpse of the Royals over several rows of heads, were now intent upon making the most of their invitations.

Her father had found a friend from the city —a white-faced creature with most execrable false teeth and a top hat and was deep in conversation with him on the state of the money market Suzanne drifted away in the direction of the lake, whose shimmering blueness and fluid white forms of swans could be discerned through a bank of weeping willow trees Seeing Cy Delamere and his companions strolling toward the lake had no bearing whatsoever upon her choice—or so she was half able to convince herself.

It was quiet by the lake The first screen of willows shut out the bumble of voices that hung over the garden like a swarm of bees Ducking her head through a sweep of trailing, gentle branches, she came to a halt as she heard her name spoken from near at hand.

"That Garbisian girl Surely, Cy, you remember now where you saw her My dear, she's the scandal of the season Didn't you read last night's *Courier*?" The crisp, upper class voice of Nadia Nielsen.

"Oh, yes, of course That's it Silly little thing."

Beyond the curtain of trailing branches, Suzanne could see the lower parts of their legs, side by side against the blue water She sought to turn and run, or to cry out, but could do neither. Instead, driven by an urge that compels one to eavesdrop upon

a conversation concerning oneself, she remained And heard all.

"I was amused to see H.M making such a fuss of that common little wog, her father," said Nadia Nielsen.

"That common little wog, my dear Nadia, has just been floated a fifty-million-pound loan by the British government to set up a manufacturing complex in the Northeast. I should think a few kind words from H.M. were contrived to put a gloss on the loan."

"Garbisian's a crook you know that, Cy "

"I *think* he's a crook. But I wouldn't go to court with any evidence I have right now."

"A royal handshake for Garbisian, then, but a snub for his tarty little daughter when the old crook tried to introduce her "

Delamere laughed shortly. "Perhaps H M. reads the gossip columns."

"Oversexed little slut."

"As you say, Nadia . . . What was that? Did someone cry out from over there?"

"I'll go see."

Suzanne was leaning back against a tree trunk, her mind in a turmoil of indecision, dry-eyed, and shocked when Nadia Nielsen drew aside the fronds of willow branches like a curtain and came face to face with the younger woman Their eyes met: on the one side the numbness of pain and humiliation that had not yet found the strength to become anger, on the other, a tight-lipped triumph, a malevolence that could be reached out for and touched.

"There's no one here, darling," called Nadia Nielsen. "No one at all."

Choking back a compulsion to scream into the other woman's face, Suzanne turned, ducked under the trailing branches and ran —anywhere— to escape from the uncaring contempt, the callous disregard, that emanated from Nadia Nielsen and was almost certainly echoed by her companion in his opinion of the "oversexed little slut," daughter of the "common little wog" who was himself a "crook." Somewhere along the way, her broad-brimmed hat was swept off her head, and trailing tendrils tore at her beautifully coiffured hair, lashed at her expensively made-up cheeks. Tripping over a knobby tree root, she lost one of her high-heeled shoes and was forced to abandon the other, the easier to continue her headlong flight. Her only

desire was to distance herself from the couple who had humiliated her.

She was skirting the edge of the lake; though the hum of voices was everywhere, the area of the willows remained deserted.

Bursting out into the sudden sunlight again, she ran pell-mell into a pair of scarlet clad arms and a brass-buttoned front that lightly bruised her tender breasts. The arms encircled her waist and hips, nude beneath the thin material

"Steady there—what's the panic?"

Suzanne looked up into a pair of cornflower blue eyes gazing down on her from under a towering black bearskin cap, and a bronzed face set off by a heavy brass chin strap that hid the lower lip An officer of the Foot Guards had caught her like some fleeing gazelle. And he was slow, and loath, to release her.

"What's the matter?" he asked again "Why, you're crying. Here, borrow my handkerchief."

His handkerchief was large, white, clean and lightly scented with eau de Cologne It was a curious comfort to bury her hot face in the cool linen and dry her tears, blow her nose

"Thank you," she said.

"You've no shoes."

"I lost them."

"You had a hat."

"How do you know?"

"I saw you at the tea I don't miss much," he said "My name's Jock, Jock Einskattle."

"I'm Suzanne Garbistan How do you do? Thanks for the loan of the hankie I'd better keep it and return it to you laundered."

"That will be nice Do you think you could deliver it back personally? Say, during dinner at the Ritz"

Soothed by the balm of his obvious admiration, Suzanne relaxed and unwound "I couldn't possibly agree to such an arrangement," she said with a touch of mockery "Not to a gentleman hidden under a bearskin like a tea cozy Why, I can only see your nose a bit of your mouth and a pair of eyes hidden in shadow."

"Underneath all this I am bald my ears stick out and I have a receding chin," said Jock Einskattle "But I am known for being loved by children and dogs—some dogs"

"Show me," she said, feeling oddly wanton in the warmth of his cornflower-blue regard.

"Of course. Anything to oblige." Slipping up the brass chin strap, he lifted the towering bearskin from his head, revealing himself.

"Hermes!" said Suzanne, almost involuntarily.

"What?"

"Nothing. You remind me of someone," she said.

He was pure Hellenic, like Freddie Hopwood, with a haughtier and more commanding nose, straight, butter-blonde hair smoothed down over a perfectly shaped skull, slightly curling behind the ears and in the nape where he had sweated under the great bearskin. And his chin was firmly molded in sharp planes that made her fingers itch for a pencil to make a drawing of its breathtaking, classical complexities.

He grinned, a heartening, lopsided grin that was amusingly at odds with the perfection of his countenance, underscoring the masculinity that seemed to hang about him like a cloak.

Away in the distance – it could have been in another land – the band struck up a golden oldie, "The Way You Look Tonight."

"Shall we dance?" said Jock Einskattle, slipping his hand about her slender waist again, resting his palm across the deep cleft of her lower back.

They danced: in and out of the willow trees, with no one watching but the quick swans and the slow, pink flamingos from the lake; in and out, and when they reached the shadows again, he kissed her so lightly upon the cheek that she might have dreamed it.

And the smile that wrinkles your nose,
Touches my foolish heart . . .

When Suzanne opened her eyes, the afternoon sunlight was shimmering in the leaves of the high branches above her head. She stretched herself luxuriously, filled with an unbidden sense of repletion; sensitive of her whole body, her smooth skin, from tousled hair to each bare foot.

Turning her head sideways, she saw her companion's sleeping face within reach; raising her hand, she touched him, smoothing back with a fingertip a wayward lock of golden hair. He stirred, brushed his brow with his hand, muttered moodily

like a babe disturbed, shifted positions and slipped back into profound slumber.

His scarlet Guardees' tunic lay where he had thrown it, likewise his silk sash, sword belt, bearskin cap. His upper torso was clad only in a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt that, as he had explained to her, was more or less *de rigueur* for officers of his battalion to wear beneath the formal scarlet, a kind of private joke against the general public, who never would have guessed it in a million years.

The place where they lay, and where she had succumbed, drunk by the sunlight and the shadows, by the mystic air of romanticism that had succeeded her former malaise, was a knoll surrounded by trees and set apart from the rest of the grounds, quite alone, unviolated . . .

Certainly she felt unviolated. Their coming together had been of the most simple and undemanding sort, and a balm to her sense of having been gravely wronged. She felt cleansed of humiliation, assured against neglect, strengthened against self-doubt; a creature of the sunlight above the flickering treetop leaves. What could touch her now, as she lay? Certainly not Nadia Nielsen and her drawling, sneering asides.

Could Cy Delamere touch her? . . .

Not to think of that! She shut out the image of his long, cool looks, his deeply inflected voice and aura of power and masculinity. This living moment was hers, and the straw image of Cy Delamere should not spoil it. A Red Admiral butterfly flickered down from the tree above, fluttered indecisively about the golden head of her sleeping companion, before she could persuade it otherwise, settled on his forehead. His cornflower-blue eyes flashed open on the instant and focused crosswise, comically, upon the beautiful insect resting there. His hand came carefully up, took the pretty thing between finger and thumb and launched it on its way.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," responded Suzanne. "Won't you be in most terrible trouble if we're found here? I mean — in the Queen's back garden!"

"No one will find us here," he said. "What's more, though strictly speaking, I am on guard duty, I have an excellent second in command and a cast-iron pretext to absent myself from the hub of affairs. You are very, very beautiful, Suzanne Garbisian."

"Thank you," she whispered. He had raised himself on one

elbow, had gently laid aside her unfastened bodice and was implanting more tender kisses between her bared breasts.

"I—I must go and find my father," she said

"Yes, you must," confirmed Jock Einskattle "But you will not. Not yet."

"He will be worried about me," she said

"He will, he will," replied the other cheerfully, meanwhile peeling the soft material from her shoulders, rendering her naked to the waist; the skirts of the Givenchy dress were already rucked high at her shapely thighs. "But it is the lot of fathers to worry about their beautiful daughters and it is a cross that Daddy will have to learn to bear—if he has not learned it already."

She glanced at him sharply. "You know about me, don't you?" she demanded. "About my—*my newspaper reputation?*"

He shrugged, grinned. "They hounded my cousin Sybil in the same sort of way. They just leech on to folks like us for the delectation of the rabble But they certainly clobbered you last night, didn't they?"

"I don't even know what was written about me last night," reported Suzanne. "I heard about it from my father, who didn't want to dwell on the subject. What *did* they say about me?"

"They say you were at some cheap disco. That you took your top half off and later danced on a table with some chap."

Suzanne pressed her hand to her brow, shook her head, the dark tendrils of her hair lashing her cheeks "I never took my top off in any disco," she said. "Yes, I went to this place with a load of people from the College, but I left quite early. As for dancing on a table top—I'm so afraid of heights that I can't wear high heels without feeling dizzy I know why they tell lies about me. Those people object to the fact that, with all my father's money, I choose to hang around cheap discos with artists and models They think I should be seen misbehaving at—oh, the sort of nightspots you go to, I imagine."

"I don't go to a lot of nightspots," said Jock Einskattle He trailed his finger lightly down to her navel, encircling it lightly "I take my pleasures where I find 'em, and any muckraker who tries to dish the dirt on Jock —or any of his friends—had better look out. Do you like what I'm doing to you?"

For answer, she reached up and, taking his butter-golden head, drew his mouth down to meet hers.

The afternoon sun slanted lower in the treetops, and the

glancing light shifted in its fickle manner over the undulating forms in the sheltered knoll, subtly outlining the woman's roundnesses, the hard muscularity of the man

With his hands and his lips, with the pride of his manhood, her partner gathered her up, mishandled and bemused as she was, and, taking her to the highest point that she had ever achieved in her young life, displayed to her the wonders of worlds beyond her own short horizon

Spent, they lay together for some while, lightly joined. Later, raising himself on an elbow, he looked down at her for a minute and bent to kiss her.

"I think I shall have to see you again, little Suzanne," he said "Indeed, I shall have to see quite a lot more of you "

He was not only Jock Einskattle, but also the thirteenth Earl of Einskattle, lord of ten thousand acres of Scottish highland and moor, and keeper of 12th-century Castle Einskattle, with its ghosts, its dark memories of ancient wars

A very short time after meeting Suzanne Garbisian, the earl resigned his commission, giving out for his reason that he was retiring to look after his Scottish estates, a publicized statement that quenched some rather unsavory speculation in the gutter press.

In that same week, the engagement was announced between Suzanne and Jock, the wedding to take place at St Margaret's, Westminster, the following month

Chapter 2

Aram Garbisian was beside himself with gleeful triumph at his daughter's social tour de force. That it should have been achieved in Britain, of all places, bastion of caste, class and privilege, that the daughter of a stateless Armenian barefoot from Syria should have reached such heights! The tycoon, upon hearing the news, sent immediately for a copy of Debrett, in which he learned of Einskattle's lineage. Jock's mother, the Dowager Countess, was still living, and there was a younger brother, the Honorable Ian Einskattle. Their father had been killed in a plane crash. Garbisian learned with delight that his daughter, little Suzanne, was going to be called the Countess of Einskattle.

Prompted by a delicacy of taste that many would not have expected him to possess, Garbisian leased a mansion in Sloane Square that had been the town house of an English duke and installed his daughter there. A full week before the wedding, a large marquee to hold nine hundred guests was erected in the ornamental garden, enclosing fountains, goldfish ponds, statuary and all. No less than three of what the tycoon described as "dress rehearsals" of floral arrangements were carried out, the top florists of London vying with each other, and with no regard for expense, to provide a botanical feast for the eye from the red-carpeted entrance, through the stately rooms, to the wedding feast under the great awning. In the end he settled for mainly roses. Roses enough to denude whole nurseries and set the industry back at least two years. For the wedding feast, he imported from Paris André Leclerc, arguably the greatest *chef de cuisine* alive and the linchpin of the Hôtel de Londres et St. Petersburg, an old and hugely prestigious establishment of which one of Garbisian's subsidiary companies was the

major stockholder. Leclerc lorded it over the buffet table arrangements, doing his own shopping in the food markets of the city. No lobster was boiled alive unless the great chef had subjected its physique and pedigree to the most telling scrutiny, and not even the humblest potato was allowed into the frypan if it carried the slightest blemish.

Suzanne lived in a daze. Since the day that Jock had proposed to her, she had not touched pencil or brush. As a purely formal gesture of approval, her father had ordered a handsome, north facing room with a generous window on the second floor to be turned into a studio, and there were placed all her unfinished pictures on easels. As he said to her, there would be plenty of time, plenty of leisure, for her to dabble in a bit of painting now and again when she was a countess. Suzanne listened to him, only half hearing. For the first time in her life, basking in Jock's passionate adoration, she had found no need for what had been her only lasting consolation and release. The unfinished pictures remained unfinished.

On the matter of the guest list, father and daughter took counsel together. Suzanne wished for all her friends from the Royal College to be invited, along with her professor. She had no friends or acquaintances in London outside of that particular circle.

As far as protocol was concerned, Garbisian was smart enough to secure the services of an elderly titled lady, thrice divorced, who had spent fifty odd years on the lunatic fringe of Society and who, like the spectator on the sidelines who sees more of the game than the players, was able to advise Garbisian — with uncanny precision, as it turned out — on those in Society who were not only desirable but who would also *accept* the invitation. The latter was of primary importance.

In this manner, a fairly distant member of the Royal Family was secured as sheet anchor of the guest list, likewise a good sprinkling of titled city businessmen who had either received favors of the Garbisian empire or who might expect to do so in the future. That accounted for what might be called the prestigious end of the list. One was unable to do better than that, Garbisian's advisor said, downing another large gin on the rocks, implying that he, Garbisian, was only a poor wog after all, and that his daughter was by all accounts scarcely better than a tart. But, surely, she added, darling Nan Linskattle's guest list would be fairly sparkling.

In this, Garbisian's advisor was far from the mark. Nancy,

Dowager Countess of Einskattle's list was brief almost to extinction, consisting only of family and a few friends of the late Earl. None of Jock's former comrades-in-arms, old school friends, fellow riders-to-hounds, shooters or fly-fishers were invited.

"Hell!" cried the tycoon. "I have budgeted for nine hundred people and we have hardly half that number. They're going to look pretty sparse out there in that cathedral of a marquee."

It was then that Lady Watchbrook-Clegg came up with her bright idea, which was none other than a rent-a-guest concept. She had a list, she informed Garbisian, pretty big names, like show-biz stars of the second and third magnitude; titled divorcées like herself who had only just, in these recent, more enlightened days, been accepted into the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, foreign rich with a yen to buy themselves into London Society; and others The members of *her* list, as Lady Watchbrook-Clegg was careful to point out, fell into two classes, they either demanded fees for attendance or were willing to donate a quite handsome sum —it all depended upon their status or their need It set Garbisian back several thousand pounds to bring the guests for his daughter's wedding up to the round nine hundred.

Suzanne had only one contribution to make, she put it forward on the day that the invitations were being sent out and made it sound like an afterthought.

"Daddy, what about that newspaper man you met at the Buckingham Palace garden party? You quite took to him, didn't you? What was his name? Cy Something-or-other? . . ."

Her father slapped his knee with sheer delight. "Cy Delamere!" he cried. "Girl, that's really bright of you to remember him. Damn me, with all that's happened since that day, he'd quite slipped my mind. Nubar," he called to his personal servant and chauffeur, an Armenian of his own generation, "send an invitation also to Mr. Cy Delamere via his office in Fleet Street or someplace."

"Yes, Mr. Garbisian."

Let him see me in St. Margaret's, Westminster, thought Suzanne. Let him see me walking down the aisle in that dress, on the arm of my bridegroom, the Earl of Einskattle. So much for the "silly little thing," so much for the "oversexed little slut" Some little thing the oversexed slut —the Countess of Einskattle!

But that, she chided herself, is a very unworthy sentiment,

of which you should be ashamed, Suzanne Garbisian. You are not marrying Jock for his title and background, any more than he is marrying you for your Daddy's money.

She thought back to that enchanted afternoon in the knoll behind the palace, and of one other occasion, when she had returned his handkerchief newly laundered and ironed. He had made love to her in a taxi after dinner at the Ritz, going round and round Green Park in the small hours. The thought prompted her to phone her intended and ask him over, or invite herself over to his place, even though it was half-past ten on a Wednesday morning and the whole house in a turmoil of preparation for her wedding, with painters and decorators, scenic designers, musicians, floral designers and catering staff everywhere.

Her fingers trembled with an obsessional desire as she dialed the number of his bachelor apartment in Upper Brook Street. His valet answered. No, his lordship was not at home. His lordship had not been home since yesterday.

Suzanne lowered the receiver with a sense of physical deprivation. She stalked up and down the drawing room, picked a cigarette from the box, lit it and threw it away. She hated cigarettes. In the end, she rang for her maid, the faithful, ever obliging Alice.

"Run me a bath, Alice," she said. "And then I'd like you to give me a massage."

Her bedroom in Sloane Square was decorated in pink and white, with a white plaster cornice in the Grecian style and most elaborate plasterwork on the ceiling.

She lay face downward upon the delicate, Florentine four poster bed that she had herself chosen from the antique dealer's in the Brompton Road. Alice was sitting astride her, massaging the large muscles of her back with slow, easy strokes. At the full extent of every stroke, when the firm and capable hands reached her neck, Suzanne felt the woman's heavy breasts lightly brush against her skin and was reminded of her mother.

Mummy had breasts like Alice . . .

"Mummy, what are they for?" she had asked, pointing.

"Why, darling, to feed my babies milk."

"Did you feed *me?*"

"Yes, darling. And Lawrence."

"Lawrence is with the angels."

"Yes, darling. With the angels."

A moment's thought. "Can I touch them, Mummy?"

"Why, of course, darling Give me your hand."

The memory crazed, broke, became a thousand disconnected pieces.

"Would you like to turn over, dear?" said Alice gently.

Suzanne obeyed The capable hands, spatulate thumbs leading, began a slow, deeply indented assault upon her flanks, her belly. The older woman's breasts swayed above her, the deep cleft between in exaggerated perspective, and stirred another memory . . .

There had been one of Mummy's friends, whom she had been encouraged to call "Uncle Louis." Uncle Louis was not one of Daddy's friends; at least, he was never around when Daddy was around. That was mostly at the villa in Corfu. Uncle Louis showed off a lot on his water skis and was no good at anything useful, she remembered, things like mending a broken toy or flying a kite All he wanted to do was huddle in a corner with Mummy, or lie with her on the private beach, or beside the swimming pool and mutter. They muttered an awful lot, he and Mummy.

One day Daddy arrived unexpectedly in his amphibian, landing close by the beach and coming up to the pier where the yacht *Beguine* was lying Daddy had not been too pleased to see Uncle Louis, that much was certain. She, Suzanne, had heard his gruff asides to Mummy about "that goddamned gigolo." However, he had brought a party of businessmen with him to his dream home in Corfu, for Daddy did not waste his entire time in holidaymaking, so he had had to put up with Uncle Louis or cause a scene.

That night, before she went to bed, she, Suzanne, had watched the maids Maria and Arianna set the table for seventeen on the terrace overlooking the whispering Ionian, under the fairy lights strung between the grape vines overhead Afterward, she had bathed, changed into her nightdress and crept along the balcony outside her room, the balcony that connected her with Mummy's room The moon was up, and she could still remember the honeysuckle-scented night, the lights of the sardine boats offshore, the hum of conversation from Daddy and his men friends on the terrace below. Mummy would be changing for dinner and would be grateful for some help with her zipper and things from "her little girl," for they had not brought Alice to Corfu that year, which was rather strange, come to think of it.

Yes, Mummy was in her room. The light filtered through

the slatted blinds of the French window, making patterns on the tiled balcony. She reached out to take the latch in her hand There was a gap in the slats providentially in line with her eyes, affording her a full view into the bedroom.

Mummy was not alone; Uncle Louis was with her, dressed in his plum-colored tuxedo with his hair greased and combed, his starkly white, ruffled shirt setting off his expensive suntan. He was kneeling beside Mummy, who was seated in her button-back chair by her dressing table. She had not yet changed and was wearing her Chinese silk dressing gown with the dragon on the back Something prevented Suzanne from depressing the latch and opening the French window: the intent look in Uncle Louis's face as, reaching up, he drew Mummy's Chinese silk dressing gown from her shoulders and down to her waist

Puzzled, disoriented, in some ways appalled, but in others intrigued, she had been witness to the interlude that followed; an interlude that was terminated by Mummy miming quite clearly that she must dress for dinner and that he, Uncle Louis, must go.

When he went, Suzanne had stolen away also; back to her room where, muddled and confused, she spent a long time staring at her wide-eyed reflection in the mirror until she was summoned to go and say good night to everyone.

They had started the first course, which was shrimp cocktail, Suzanne's favorite.

"Here is my little darling. Come to Mummy, pet " Mummy was in brilliant form, dressed in a shiftlike gown of silk patterned in red and green, the like of which not a woman in a hundred would have dared to attempt, but which she carried off brilliantly She took her little darling on her knee, fed her shrimp and gave her a sip of wine The guests indulged her also, questioning her about her childish activities, laughing appreciatively at the sallies of the five-year-old made precocious by overattention, loose tongued by emotion and overtiredness.

The first course over, the servants began to gather up the empty dishes. A silence hung over all as conversation broke and prepared to reestablish itself. It was the cue for Suzanne's departure to bed, but she clung to a notion of remaining, of recovering her position in the center of the stage, of making them laugh again with her cuteness It was entirely in innocence that, pointing first to her mother and then to the man in the plum-colored tuxedo, she piped up with a question that caused

her mother to become instantly haggard beyond her years, and a *frisson* of horror to pass round the table like a flash fire

"Mummy, why were you feeding Uncle Louis with milk like a baby in your bedroom tonight? . . ."

The image, the recollection, brought a cry of agony to Suzanne's lips, to which the attentive Alice, mistaking it for an expression of desire, responded by planting a kiss upon the rosy peak of her young mistress's right breast, an act that won her a screech of abuse as would not have shamed a fishwife, concluding with an admonition.

"And don't you ever dare to do that to me again, or you're fired—do you hear me? Fired!"

The bells of adjacent Westminster Abbey joined with those of St. Margaret's in glorification of the union between Suzanne Zena Garbisian, spinster of the parish of Westminster, and John Errol Percy Machinish Forbes Machaninny Einskattle, 13th Earl of Einskattle and bachelor of the parish of St. Angus, Crachie, Scotland.

As noted in about every newspaper and magazine in the land, the bride arrived at the church dead on time on the arm of her father, one of the richest men in the world, and wearing a bridal gown of white silk faille, with a veil of Brussels lace held in place by an antique coronet of silver gilt and pearls

The groom had been a little late, indeed, had taken his place at the altar rail, in company with his best man and brother, the Honorable Ian Einskattle, barely seconds before the organ piped up with "Here Comes the Bride." The radiant countess to be stalked slowly down the aisle, object of all eyes, past guests freeloading, paid and paying, past the leveled lorgnette of Nancy, Dowager Countess of Einskattle, her mother-in law imminently to be, who had traveled down from Scotland on the overnight express and whose searching glance through the lorgnette was her first acquaintance with "the little foreign gel" who had captivated her son.

Suzanne joined hands with Jock, who looked every inch the ex-Guardee in his suavely fitting gray Savile Row morning coat. Any misgivings she may have had about his last bachelor's evening were dispelled by the brightness of his cornflower-blue eyes, the smooth and healthy tan of his cheeks, the dazzling whiteness of his lopsided grin. His brother Ian looked less lively. Ian she had met only once. Stricken by polio in childhood, the younger sibling had grown up in the shadow of

his handsome, ebullient brother and seemed to carry the burden of it.

"Wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded wife? . . ."

Somewhere behind her, she thought irrationally, Cy Delamere was watching her, perhaps tracing the shape of her beneath the wedding gown. She hoped so Let him admire her, perhaps he would find Nadia Nielsen less appetizing when next he bedded her.

"Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband? . . ."

"I will!" Joyfully, for the sun was playing wild delights with Jock's golden helmet of hair, shining through the tall, leaded Gothic windows, creating a saintly halo about his classical head When he drew her to him for the first kiss of their nuptials, their mouths met in passion, possibly scandalizing the good parson who had enjoined them to make only a purely symbolic act of their new estate.

Next, the family retired to the vestry for the signing and witnessing of the marriage certificate; and it was there that Jock was able to introduce his new wife and his new father-in-law to his mother, which won Suzanne and Aram Garbisian more lorgnette work from the Dowager Countess, and the very gracious comment, "Your daughter is a very pretty and stylish gel, Mr Garbisian Do you think that we could meet sometime for you to advise me on my investments?" All in all, it went off very well.

The Wedding March, stridently played, brought them all to the outer sunlight and the host of rubberneckers assembled to ogle their richer betters, together with the TV cameras and the heavy mob from Fleet Street.

Suzanne was handed into the Rolls-Royce and her bridegroom followed after. They laughed into each other's eyes, kissed, made play with eager hands.

"You looked like a dream – something out of Inca legend, a virgin brought to sacrifice."

"And you, a god brought down from Parnassus to brighten this bread-and butter, ordinary, London Saturday noon."

"You are the most exciting girl, Suzanne."

"And you are the most exciting man, my Jock."

The chauffeur took them by way of Whitehall, the Mall, the Palace. Passing the Royal Mews, where one can just discern the treetops surmounting the knoll, he kneaded her upper thigh under the white silk faille.

"Scene of our late triumph. We must go back there one day."

"We are already here," she whispered into his mouth

Jock Einskattle leaned forward, took the voicepipe "Driver, take us to Eaton Square by way of Battersea Bridge, will you?"

"Yessir," came the answer.

Jock pulled down the blinds all round, released the lever that rendered the passenger seats of the Rolls into the semblance of a luxury double bed. He shrugged out of his tailcoat

"Battersea Bridge is one hell of a long way," said Suzanne.

"We have a hell of a way to go, my darling," responded her bridegroom "And the wedding feast will keep. Suzanne, I notice you are not wearing a stitch under that wedding gown. What would Seymour Morell of the *Courier* say about *that* if he but knew?"

The passing ambience of west London, drifting in by association of sights and sounds through the shuttered windows of the Rolls, their wedding coach, provided an earthy backdrop to the mutual passion. The bridal gown and lacy veiling, abandoned on the floor in a crumpled heap, along with the coronet, shoes, tailcoat, pants and everything else, underscored a fresh program of excesses initiated largely by Einskattle, that carried Suzanne beyond her new frontiers of erotic bliss Still wanting, still ready to continue her delicious indoctrination, they were discreetly warned by the chauffeur that they were approaching Sloane Square Laughingly, they helped each other back into their clothing, gave such attention as was possible to each other's general appearance and contrived to alight from the limousine with a fair degree of *sang-froid*, facing the assembled news photographers who had been waiting half an hour or more by the red-carpeted canopy.

"Suzanne, I thought you had had an accident!" Daddy was at the door to greet them both.

"Sorry, sir. Got held up in a stupid traffic jam. My own fault —I suggested a shortcut through the back streets," supplied Jock, always the military tactician, never at a loss for an alibi.

"My lady, your hair needs attention " Suzanne looked round, bemused, to see that it was Alice who had addressed her by her new entitlement.

"Yes, that would be a good idea," she replied "Excuse me for a few minutes, Jock, Daddy "

Flush cheeked after the abandonment in the Rolls, she faced herself in the vanity mirror while Alice attended to her coiffure as best she was able and readjusted her veil and gilt coronet.

"It was a lovely service, my lady," essayed the maid. "I saw it all, every bit. Cried, too. Would you believe it, at my age? You looked so beautiful, dear."

Melted by a sudden remorse, Suzanne turned in her seat and took Alice's hands in hers. "I'm sorry about the other day," she said. "I was all out of kilter about something. Forget what I said. Nothing has changed between you and me, Alice dear, nor ever will – after what we've been through, what we've known together."

Alice pressed her hand. "That's all right, dear," she said. "I didn't take it amiss. We do the best we can, one with the other, and it isn't right all the time. Shall you want me to stay with you, now that you're married, dear? You've never said, and I've been wondering."

Suzanne returned the pressure of hand. "Of course, Alice dear," she assured the older woman. "If anything, I shall need you more than ever, now that I'm married. Oh, Alice – how could I ever exist without you?" She touched the other's cheek and laid her finger along the cheekbone, making a small dam against the tears that flowed, till they overspilled her finger and fell free.

"Your guests are waiting, my lady," whispered Alice, drying her eyes.

The late arrival of the bride and groom at their reception and wedding feast, due to a "traffic jam," had thrown out of joint the arrangement whereby bride and groom and their surviving parents were intended to receive the incoming guests at the entrance to the garden marquee. Instead, the nine hundred guests were already heavily into the buffet tables presided over by Monsieur Leclerc in his tall chef's hat, white stock, long apron and checked trousers. The fare was bewildering in its diversity, baffling as to choice, independent (thanks to the advantages of deep freeze) of seasonal availability. The menu cards, passed from hand to hand among the nine hundred guests, became collectors' pieces among the memorabilia of the decade. In fact, the menu was dictated by Aram Garbisian himself, and was based upon a similar bill of fare that he had enjoyed upon the old liner *Berengaria* in 1935, during the Atlantic crossing that had been the prelude to his fortune.

A glass of champagne in one hand, nibbling on a canapé held in the other, Suzanne regarded her new husband, who was holding forth to her father just out of earshot. Unexpectedly, Daddy and Jock had got along like a house on fire from the very first, the younger man deferring to the older, yet without undue obsequiousness, and Daddy seeming to shed the deference that he, as a stateless outcast, always appeared to project toward upper-class English. She marveled that Jock was holding forth with some vehemence, while Daddy was listening intently, his eyes half-closed, the way he always did when one of his more trusted financial advisors was making a pitch, nodding from time to time, his hand laid loosely across his son-in-law's broad shoulders.

The relationship between her father and her new husband happily established, there remained, in her mind, one other unresolved relationship: her unfortunate and as yet undefended encounter with Cy Delamere, who must immediately be sought out and brought to heel. He must be made to acknowledge, even if only by implication, that Suzanne Garbisian, by her elevation to the consort of a 13th Earl, had by light-years soared above the sobriquet of "slut."

She put down her glass, nodded to a row of unfamiliar, smiling faces and walked to the door of the drawing room, where her father's faithful servant, Nubar, stood.

"Nubar, I hope you're enjoying yourself," she said distractedly. "You look rather tired. Do, I beg you, leave it to the others and take a rest if you need." She had known him all her life, even before Alice. He had been present, standing at his master's elbow, when she had made that definitive outburst—in childish innocence—at the dinner table set for seventeen under the moonlit vines in Corfu so many years ago that she did not care to remember.

"I'm fine, my lady," responded Nubar, bowing.

"I am a little puzzled, Nubar," she said.

"Puzzled, my lady?"

"Yes. My father most particularly invited a very important gentleman from Fleet Street, but I haven't seen him here. Perhaps he was . . . delayed?"

"You refer, my lady, to Mr. Delamere," supplied the manservant, putting on a pair of rimless glasses and scanning an extremely scuffed sheaf of papers. "At least, that is what I suppose. I have to inform you, ma'am, that Mr. Delamere was among those who declined the invitation."

"He . . . *refused?*"

"That is so, ma'am." The eyes behind the glasses were watchful.

"Oh." Was she betraying too much disappointment?

"However, Mr. Delamere did send a present, ma'am, which is on display with the rest, in the drawing room."

"Thank you, Nubar."

"Thank *you*, my lady."

There were a few people still nosing around the long tables upon which the wedding presents had been laid, they were either checking to see if their own offerings had been given sufficient prominence of display, or figuring if other people had been more generous, or ostentatious, in their choice. Suzanne had not seen the display, it seemed enormous. Pride of place was given to Aram Garbisian's present to the happy couple: the deeds of an ancient palazzo on the Grand Canal, Venice. Side by side with these crusty documents was Countess Nancy's symbolic offering: a perfect diamond of thirty five carats, known as "The Enskattle Jewel," which had been passed from countess to countess since 1745, when it had been presented to the then incumbent by Prince Charles Stuart, "Bonnie Prince Charlie," for unspecified services rendered. There was much else: endless silver salvers, traveling clocks to last a lifetime of continuous travel, candlesticks, cigarette lighters, pieces of Minton, Ming and Crown Derby china, a stuffed fox in a glass case, a date palm tree ready for planting, innumerable biscuit barrels.

And Cy Delamere's present: books.

Three publishers' presentation volumes, bound in calf with a lot of gold tooling. The titles were rather daunting. *The Advance of Monetarism, Market Forces and Democracy, The 1980s—A Financial Scenario.*

Puzzled, Suzanne riffled through the pages of the uppermost book, eventually coming to the title page. The author's name was therein inscribed:

Nadia Nielsen
Ph.D., F.R.S.A.

That bitch, Suzanne thought, and stifled an urge to fling the three volumes across the room. She left the room quickly and returned to the festivities.

* * *

Daddy's amphibian was to take them to Venice. By a special dispensation from the Home Office, the plane was allowed to alight upon the Thames close by Westminster Bridge, and the happy couple departed from the steps of the Mother of Parliaments in the glare of TV lights and a multitude of onlookers lining the bridge.

Daddy was the last to embrace Suzanne. The old Armenian drew his daughter close to him. A moderate drinker, he had imbibed too much champagne and was maudlin in consequence.

"Rejoice, girlie," he breathed in her ear. "My poor mother, and particularly my sisters—they who never lived to enjoy the love of good men, but were ravished and plucked down in the springtime of their womanhood—are rejoicing with you this night."

The motorboat brought them to the amphibian, which was moored close by the great bridge and pointing upstream in the ebb tide. In the rosy flow of sunset, the silvery machine's twin jet pods gushed flame, which drove it swiftly forward against the tide and carried it skyward. As it banked over Chelsea and turned southward, the last of the sun's rays reflected from its slender wings. Aram Garbisian wiped away a tear.

In the small but cleverly designed cabin, Suzanne and Jock dined off champagne and ikra caviar, fresh lobster with a paper dry chablis and good old English steak and kidney pudding washed down with draft Guinness. The crew of the Garbisian jet was comprised of a pilot and copilot, an engineer, a radio operator and a stewardess. The latter was a new face to Suzanne.

"I hope you've had a very happy day, my lady," she murmured nervously. She was a pretty creature, all gold and pink — ash-blonde hair and an English rose complexion — with a voluptuous body.

"Thank you," said Suzanne. "You're new. What's your name?"

"Tricia, ma'am. The other girl, Janice, was married last week. Will that be all, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you. That was a lovely dinner."

"Excellent," supplied Jock, watching the blonde over the rim of his brandy glass.

Tricia cleared away the dishes and left the cabin with a "good night." She had already lowered the double bed that occupied the after end of the apartment. It was ten o'clock,

and Suzanne speculated that she had been awake, and hyperactive, for sixteen hours. She could not have felt more awake, more vibrant, more eager . . .

"We're just crossing the Channel, darling. Come and see." He was standing by a window, holding out his hand to her. She went to him. His arm stole about her waist, holding her close. They looked down at the wrinkled sea below, where passing ships were making a complexity of herringbone patterns on the surface. Away in the distance, on the French coast, a lighthouse winked forlornly and alone in green and white.

"I wanted you in church," he said, "during the ceremony."

"And I you."

"I wonder if it was obvious to everyone. To the parson, for instance."

"To the entire congregation."

"Including the doddering princess."

"The one with the pussycat fur."

They laughed against each other's mouths.

"Do something to me," she said, with a sudden inspiration to wantonness. "Something—*rather alarming!*"

Jock looked at her as if to gauge her mood and her desire. She was wearing her going-away outfit, a light suit and blouse, the trim jacket of which she had already discarded for dinner. With one hand upon her shoulder, the other at the neck of the blouse, he tore the thin crepe de chine into a rag at her waist. When she screamed and instinctively covered her breasts with her hands, he slapped her lightly across the mouth and imprisoned her hands. Then he ripped off her bra and proceeded to make a rosette of love bites around her left nipple while she struggled and cried out, half-screaming, half-laughing, unsure of him but aroused.

The skirt went the same way as the blouse, as did her panties. Wearing only stockings, which were kept up only by the firm curves of her upper thighs, she was carried to the bed, where she lay, panting and waiting. He did not keep her waiting for long. He slid out of his clothes quickly and dimmed the cabin lights. In the half light Suzanne thought he was all Greek god, blonde Adonis, Hermes, a Ganymede brought to maturity and perfection of shape and form. Nor did the vision fade when he laid himself upon her, for his attentions were of the most subtle and perfect sort, till she was gathered up into a transport of wanting and receiving. She cried out for joy and fulfillment

and moaned to him to do anything—anything—that he desired with her.

And this, the latter, was her downfall—and his.

He paused in his attentions, gazed down at her, her hair tumbled against the pillow, arms outstretched.

"Why don't we invite the blonde Venus to join us and make a threesome? How about that? The stewardess, I mean."

The world of passion that he had constructed about her with so much care and attention, perfect in every way, crashed to the ground. She sat up in bed. Aghast.

"You don't *mean* that?" she cried.

He saw the pit that he had dug for himself and walked into. At once the lopsided grin prevailed over the wide-eyed, staring lust.

"Of course not, sweetie. I was only teasing. I thought the notion might amuse you. Get you going. Know what I mean?"

He pleaded in vain. Self-doubt and a lifetime's deprivation of affection coupled to a warm nature conspired against her acceptance of his apology. He might have been only kidding her, but the notion that he could even think or speak of bringing another woman—and a total stranger—to their marriage bed was total anathema to Suzanne. All the passion, the complete and tender submission that he had so skillfully inspired in her, melted like snow in the warm hand and dissipated into a sad compliance. She did not resist him in his further pursuits; she might just as well have done so. On the surface, she was as warm and ardent as ever, but only a fool—and Einskattle was no fool—could have missed the difference. In the end, having wrought an empty triumph upon her body, he turned aside from her, switched on the bedside light and groped for a cigarette. Suzanne lay where he had left her, a slow tear falling from a closed eye turned in profile to him.

"I think I'll go and have a yarn with the pilot," he said. "Don't feel very tired. You go to sleep."

He patted her shoulder; she did not respond.

"Good night, then. It's been a great day."

Suzanne could not reply. She heard the cabin door open and shut. The engines droned on. Still nude, she rolled over onto her back, stared up at the patterned ceiling.

Memories—the anodyne of present pain.

Mummy had never called her her darling girl again after the episode at the dinner party in Corfu but had seemed to

become more attentive and watchful, more concerned with her surviving child's well being than ever before.

Uncle Louis had departed before breakfast the morning following that fatal evening, whisked away in the amphibian that had been the predecessor of the present, more sophisticated model in which she had enjoyed the delights of her wedding night . . .

The incident at the dinner party was never referred to in Suzanne's presence, but there were private rows between Mummy and Daddy that could be heard all over the villa, in which the latter referred to his wife in terms that were incomprehensible to the child and to most of the Greek speaking servants The intent, however, was plain to all, even to Suzanne what Mummy and Uncle Louis had been up to in her bedroom, though only light dalliance at that particular time, was a long way from innocent breast feeding

As a result of this incident, Mummy had persuaded her irate spouse that she was bored And she was bored, particularly, because she had been parted from her painting, which had been her whole life until the age of thirty In a package deal between her own father, a Chicago real estate czar, and the Garbisian empire, she had been persuaded to marry a man over twenty years her senior Oddly, possibly out of desperation, for Uncle Louis was only one of many such, Daddy had purchased, from an impoverished Italian contessa, a villa near Amalfi on the Salerno peninsula, where Mummy might paint — and only paint No guests, no house parties, no candlelit dinners. And she was to be accompanied by her maid Alice and — a smart move, this — by her observant daughter Suzanne

Suzanne's breathing quickened slightly with the onset of a recollection Reaching out, she touched the light switch and darkened the cabin, closed her eyes in the blackness The drone of the engines, far from distracting her, only served to shut away the outer world and intensify her remembrances .

The villa had been a delight Three summers in a row, Mummy Alice and she had journeyed south and spent two months there Mummy went daily into the whitewashed studio at the top of the lemon grove that fronted the sea and painted till it was dusk, with only an hour's break for luncheon, which she and Suzanne took together on the shaded terrace. Mummy seldom spoke of her work save to explain the daily arrival of one of the boys from a nearby village by telling Suzanne that she was painting his portrait This was in the third summer at

Amalfi. Suzanne had matured early; by the age of ten, she was acutely conscious of boys; and this particular boy was her first love. His name was Aldo, and he had the looks of a mature man, though he could scarcely have been more than fourteen or fifteen. She had pestered Mummy constantly to be allowed to see the portrait, but Mummy was adamant that "it was not going well," that she "had not yet made a definitive statement."

A week or two went by, and, though Aldo appeared daily, his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, his white teeth flashing, sailor's hat cocked jauntily upon his unruly curls, and disappeared into the studio with Mummy, there was no indication that the picture was near being finished. In response to Suzanne's inquiries, she came out with yet more painterly catch phrases, "the tonal development's all wrong," and "I've maybe overstated right now, in which case I may have to scrape out and try again."

On Fridays, Mummy and Alice went shopping in Naples, which was only a drive over a mountain pass and a breathtaking journey along the coastal plain that took in a view of Vesuvius. They usually took Suzanne along with them, but on this particular and memorable occasion she had pleaded a tummyache and begged to stay at home. No sooner had Mummy's little Fiat vanished round the first bend than she made a sparkling recovery from the tummyache. She raced to Mummy's bedroom suite, where, in the papier-mâché jewel box, she found the key to the studio. None of the servants had seen her gliding up through the lemon grove. The door sprang open to her touch. The light inside the rectangular, stone-built chamber, with its huge picture window fronting on to the searing blueness of Mediterranean sea and sky, half-blinded her for some moments. Presently she found her bearings. There was a table, and on it a sheaf of drawings. At the far end was a tall easel holding a canvas turned away from her. A tall mirror was set at an angle beside the canvas. There was also a generous divan besprinkled with silken cushions at the far end, beyond the easel.

That would be the portrait of Aldo on the easel, the one that was going so badly. Her sole desire was to see it just once before Mummy's search after perfection possibly removed it forever, for Mummy had a way of painting fresh pictures over the tops of her failures.

Rounding the easel, she had gazed upon Mummy's secret life in the studio at Amalfi . . .

Not only a portrait of the boy-man Aldo, but also a self-

portrait in the classical manner, with the artist engaged upon her task, brush and palette in hands, looking into the long mirror and simply recording what she had seen there . . . Herself in three-quarter length and entirely nude, with the tan of the Mediterranean sun deeply etched upon her perfect body, save where her bikini had protected thin strips at bosom and loins. Beside her, one deeply bronzed arm possessively encircling her still lissome waist, was the boy Aldo, naked like herself and with his manhood fully exposed Their bodies were touching, hip to thigh, and both were looking out at the viewer as at their own reflections in the long mirror. In the face of Aldo there was something of the cosseted young stud cat who has been lapping cream; in Mummy's even across the gap of years, Suzanne could not bring herself to more than lightly pursue what she had seen there, and still she jibbed away from it there was a deep fulfillment.

To the child of ten it had been a massive intrusion upon her sensibilities, this blatant statement of what Mummy and the boy Aldo had been up to on those long summer days in the studio high above the sea. In later years, she had been able to come to terms with the implications of what must have been Mummy's only outlet and sole escape from an empty marriage with an old man At the age of ten, it had been too much

The sheaf of drawings on the table —all of them brilliant studies of Aldo alone, or with the artist —were even more explicit than the painting, some of them obviously drawn from memory, showing the pair of them lying together upon the cushioned divan.

Suzanne had torn the drawings into small pieces and trampled them underfoot, afterward pouring India ink over them. With a sharp palette knife she scored the offending canvas across and across again, then cut out what she considered to be the unspeakable portions, finally overturning the long mirror so that it splintered into a thousand pieces on the tiled floor. Then, leaving the door unlocked and wide open, she fled to her room and shut herself in.

So long ago . . .

Poor Mummy Poor Suzanne, for it had taken her many years to realize the hurt she had done to a woman imprisoned in a disastrous marriage She stared up into the darkness and saw a glimmer of moonlight shift across the patterned ceiling of the cabin as the aircraft slightly changed course She tried to shut out the memories of Mummy and what came after

Amalfi; to think, rather, of how it had been for her before her daughter had broken in upon her idyll up above the lemon grove; the delights her love-starved soul and body must have known in the arms and lips of the beautiful fisher lad. Surely, from the wreckage of her marriage and her life, Mummy must have taken some consolation from those blissful hours that she had so lovingly and faithfully recorded in pencil and paint what had clearly been intended for her eyes only.

Suzanne thrashed about in the commodious double bed, thrusting aside the silk sheets and rendering herself nude. The memories had left her feeling restless. If only she had not been so dismissive with Jock, who had certainly not meant anything serious with his wayward, prurient suggestion. She had been wrong to take offense. If only he would come back to her. If only she had the fortitude to go and fetch him, to apologize and beg him to come back to bed with her and drive her mad with his lips and fingertips the way only he had ever been able to do, the very first.

Finally she drifted into sleep, her breathing eased, the sweat of passion upon her smooth body was swiftly dispelled by the cosseting warmth all around her.

When she woke, it was with a start of alarm, for the amphibian was still, engines silent. Reaching out, she found the empty place beside her, the tumbled sheets. With a sudden sense of panic, she tore the bedside phone from its hook and called into it. The engineer announced himself in reply from the flight deck.

"Where are we?" she demanded.

"Venice airport, my lady," came the reply. "As soon as it's light enough, we're taking off again to make a sea landing in the Giudecca canal."

"I see. Where's my – where's Lord Einskattle?"

"His lordship's just having a cup of coffee on the flight deck, ma'am. Would you like one sent in?"

"No. No, thank you." She replaced the phone.

Peering out, she could see the edge of the runway with its necklace of colored lights, beyond that the floodlit facade of the airport building, beyond that the flaming chimney tops of the Mestre refineries. She shivered, as if someone had just walked over her grave, on her wedding night.

He joined her again at first light, chipper as a squirrel, silk dressing gown taut across his broad chest and shoulders, golden

hair smoothed down, freshly shaved and showered, cheerful, loving Her heart melted instantly and she thought what a fool she had been to take offense at him on their wedding night.

"You look marvelous, darling," he told her, and kissed her nose. "Did you sleep well? We're just going to take off again. Come and see Venice from just above the rooftops." He took her by the hand, settled on a seat by a window and drew her onto his lap just as the engines roared to life With a protesting squeal of released brakes, the amphibian trundled forward. He slipped his hands from her waist and cupped them over her bared breasts.

"I love you, my lady," he murmured into her ear.

"I love you, my lord," she responded.

They swept over the end of the runway, out over the lagoon, and suddenly the City of the Doges, Venice Serenissima, lay all before them like the convoluted, abstract pattern on an Isfahan prayer rug The central, serpentine theme was the Grand Canal bisecting the two main shapes and the small waterways stitched through the jumble of terra cotta rooftops, threads of silver in the morning light.

"San Giorgio Maggiore!" said Jock, pointing down at the magnificent great church on its separate little island.

"It's so beautiful," breathed Suzanne. "Venice is surely the loveliest man-made thing on earth."

"Let's go and see the whole of the lagoon," said Einskâttle. "What do you say, darling?"

"Let's!"

He reached out for the phone "Captain Struthers, take up right round the lagoon," he said. "Out to Torchello, the Lido, Chioggia and back. The ten-dollar tour "

"Right, sir!"

She nestled back in his arms, drawing aside his dressing gown and slipping her hand across the smooth pelt of his bare chest, opening the garment wide to find that he was entirely nude. His manhood stirred against her as their mouths met.

"And now—I want you," she whispered "In full view of all Venice."

"You shall, you shall," he promised, and drew her down upon him, she straddling his bared loins with her shapely legs.

The isles of Murano and Burano went by, Torcello and the jumble of islets and spaghettilike waterways off Iesolo, where early morning fishermen stood up in their boats and waved to the passing silvery amphibian. They flew along the starkly

white sand of the Lido, the wavelets already speckled with bathers; and it went past their window all unregarded, save as a gold and azure backdrop to the great orchestration of their mutual passion. At last Suzanne collapsed, sobbing for joy against his chest, as the craft swooped low over the city and shaped course to alight on the Giudecca

The amphibian moored off the Punta della Dogana at the end of the Giudecca, close by the Grand Canal, where a gondola had been waiting since first light to greet them. The craft bore the coat of arms of the noble De Sacco-Fortis family Aram Garbisian had purchased the Palazzo Sacco-Fortis for his daughter and son-in-law, at a knock-down price, after the last heir of the line had lost his shirt at the gambling casinos

The Einskattles bathed and dressed leisurely and ate a hearty English-style breakfast of creamed fish and eggs and deviled kidneys before they boarded the waiting gondola that was to take them to their new Venetian residence A motorboat had gone on ahead, loaded to the gunwales with two sets of matching, crocodile skin luggage (a wedding present from the Durable Assets Holding Company, the organization in which Suzanne had signed herself Chairman and major stockholder a mere half-hour before she had met Jock Einskattle).

Captain Struthers and his crew were lined up at the gangway as a guard of honor when the couple departed Struthers, who had served the Garbisian empire as pilot since Suzanne was a knee-high girl, shook her proffered hand warmly and gave her a look compounded of affection, admiration and -something else The unknown quality struck Suzanne very forcibly, especially since she seemed to detect it in the other men of the crew: the copilot, engineer and radio operator There was not enough in their expressions that could bring her to ask, "What's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that?" So she was left with the sense of having toothpaste on her lips or egg on her cheek The stewardess Tricia flushed, avoided her eyes and made a clumsy sketch of a curtsy.

"Have a good flight back to London, Captain," said Suzanne, waving as a sweep of the gondolier's oar bore them swiftly away.

"Thank you, my lady," responded Struthers, saluting

As they shaped course toward the Dogana, topped by its gilded ball, Jock Einskattle pointed to the painted cartouche on the side of the gondola's awning that bore the arms of the

former owners. "We'll have that replaced by the green dragon of the Einskattles," he said Addressing the gondolier, he said, "Get that fixed, fellow, will you?"

"Mi scusi, signor. Non comprendo . . ."

"He doesn't understand you, darling," said Suzanne, amused. "And, anyhow, I don't suppose your average Venetian gondolier is clued up on the heraldry of the Scottish peerage."

"Bloody foreigners—they're all alike," replied her husband good-humoredly.

The slight, nagging worry about Struthers and his crewmen's farewell attitude to her was instantly swept from Suzanne's mind as they turned the corner and entered the Grand Canal, which was teeming with traffic large and small: a jostling, splashing, colorful throng of motor and oar driven craft; the cheap and convenient *traghetti* that ferry across the canal, the *motorscafi* and the *vaporetti*, rowboats and gondolas, all under a morning sky of deepest cerulean, all dancing upon white-flecked waters newly scoured clean by the miraculous tide that sweeps out into the Adriatic

"Point to the Palazzo Sacco-Fortis," demanded Suzanne of the gondolier in her commendable Italian As they rounded the next bend he pointed to a tall palace faced with pink stucco It was an imposing, three story building of breathtaking charm that looked like a doll's house from a distance but held promise of spaciousness within and hints of shadowed, tree-hung courtyards where cool fountains splashed in marble basins.

The Palazzo Sacco-Fortis amply fulfilled its promise A butler, a housekeeper, three males and six females were lined up on the steps to greet them The butler was called Luigi, the homely, pippin cheeked housekeeper was an Englishwoman named Mrs Skillet. Hand in hand, the newlyweds walked through the stone archway surmounted by the carved arms of the De Sacco Fortis ("We'll have that damned thing down, and the green dragon of the Einskattles up there," muttered Jock) and into the palace courtyard Beautifully tended dwarf cypresses and flame headed bougainvillea surrounded an oval of scissor-cut lawn a stone cherub poured an eternal fountain of water into a basin shaped like an enormous scallop shell, where tropical fish glanced and darted like fireflies

"Beautiful!" declared Suzanne "Quite beautiful!"

"The Contessa will please to come this way?" said Luigi, bowing and gesturing with a white gloved hand to a carved, ornamental staircase As they ascended the stairs, they could

see nothing and be seen by nothing that lay outside the palazzo; nothing existed within save the private silence and beauty of the interior.

"The apartments of the Conte and the Contessa," intoned Luigi, gesturing to two of his acolytes to open a pair of carved, gilded doors leading into a high-ceilinged room with a wide, waxed floor scattered with priceless Oriental rugs It was merely an antechamber to the bedrooms and dressing rooms of the master suite.

Even Suzanne, blasé from a lifetime of unquestioned luxury, cried out in delight to see her own bedroom: a poem in dusty pink and old gold, with a tester bed overhung by a swag of stiff gold drapes supported by a pair of carved and gilded nymphs attended by cherubs. The pink and white tiled floor was softened by an enormous Chinese carpet, the pile so thick that one's feet sank into it as into a meadow of white clover; while beyond the jalousied windows was a balcony that looked out and over the canal onto the passing charivari.

They embraced upon the balcony, uncaring of the watching servants, uncaring of the uncounted eyes that must have seen them from the canal.

He looked down at her "Well, my Suzanne?"

"I think," she replied, "that I am the happiest, luckiest girl in the whole world."

Later, as she regarded herself in the sixteenth-century dressing table mirror, alone and pensive, contemplating her luck and her present happiness, a sudden and unbidden light broke in upon a dark corner of her mind.

"That was it," she said aloud to her reflection. "That was surely what I saw in the faces of Captain Struthers and his men They were feeling *sorry* for me! And were embarrassed with it!

"But, why sorry—for *me?*"

Chapter 3

They had luncheon in the delicious coolness of the roof garden, which was overhung with vines, furnished with pagan statuary and enlivened by the presence of a pair of quick, amusing little lizards who scuttered up the walls. The fare was simple and typically Venetian: a vegetable soup followed by *fegato alla mascarpone*. With the liver and the onions they drank the dry white Soave di Verona and red Merlot.

He toasted her beauty and they entwined hands and arms as they sipped, after the fashion of lovers and friends.

"I'm so sorry about last night, Jock," she said. It was the first allusion either of them had made to it.

"My fault," he said. "One never gets it quite right. My tongue ran away with me. Too much champagne at the wedding, I suppose."

Her eyes strayed away from his, watching the two lizards who were darting in small, jerky movements toward a large fly that was feasting upon crumbs from the table. She waited till the lizards were close upon their prey, till the fly had prudently taken wing, before she said, still without looking at him, "Whatever did you do last night, after you left me?"

"Oh, went forward to the flight deck and had a yarn with the chaps. Took over the controls and flew for a while. I was at the controls when we were over Munich, and one could see the Bavarian Alps quite clearly ahead in the moonlight. More wine, darling?"

In a very small voice, she said, "Was the new stewardess — what's her name? . . ."

"Tricia?" He cocked an eye at her.

"Was Tricia yarning with you 'chaps' on the flight deck all night?"

Suzanne had the odd and surely ridiculous impression that he was going to strike her, but, laughing aloud, Jock pointed a gently mocking finger very close to the tip of her nose.

"Lady Einskattle, darling, you are *jealous!*" he declared

"Darling I —oh, don't be ridiculous," she faltered, coloring up in confusion.

"You think that, while you were asleep on our sanctified marriage bed, I was having it off with that busty blonde in the kitchen. Or, at least, you've got half a notion tucked away in that pretty little head of yours. Come on, out with it. Own up." Taking her chin gently between finger and thumb, he directed her gaze to meet him His expression was quizzical, slightly mocking, entirely good humored.

She capitulated. Laughed.

"I *am* jealous," she admitted. "For one thing, you are terribly attractive to women. And the Tricia girl does come on rather strong."

He leaned across the table and kissed her "Well, I hope we've managed to lay that particular ghost to rest," he said. "That quite ridiculous ghost."

"You are, you know," she persisted. "Terribly, dangerously attractive to women, I mean. I expect I shall have to work overtime to drag them away from you."

He stroked the palm of her hand with a fingertip The cornflower-blue eyes burned into her eyes and she felt her defenses fall, her pulse quicken, her whole body stir for him

"It's going to be a long afternoon," he murmured "Let's pursue this theme of my being so damned attractive to women. With illustrated examples."

All through the languorous, long afternoon, the gilded nymphs and cherubs looked down on the gold-draped bed as Jock guided Suzanne through new paths of delight. His imagination, so subtle and persuasive, held her in total thrall, so that, like a flower's head ever seeking the sun, she followed blindly, avidly, where he led. In the later stages of their transports, he led her along a devious path that brought her up short, breathless, protesting . . .

"No, darling' Please, no," she whispered "I —I don't like being hurt."

Jock sat up Nude, bronzed, the light from the jalousied windows throwing a lambent halo about his golden head, he regarded her, arms folded Because of the light behind him,

she could not see, could only gauge, his expression. And from his tone of voice, she reckoned it to be tight-lipped and disapproving.

"This thing, you know, isn't all hearts and flowers, the far off music of violins," he said.

"I know, I know," she replied. "Darling, I didn't come to you an untried virgin. But I don't get any delight, any pleasure, from *that*. It makes me feel—degraded. And it also frightens me."

He reached forward and, seizing her hands, drew her up to a sitting position close to him.

"Without fear, there's no pleasure in it," he whispered against her mouth. "What you do is ride with the fear, let it get hold of you, get carried along with it, surrender yourself utterly. That's how it is. Do you understand?"

She nodded, wanting so hard to please him, conscious of her inadequacy. She had the wayward thought that the hostess Tricia looked the sort who enjoyed being quite savagely spanked, perhaps even whipped . . .

"So?" he continued. "Do we try again?"

She clung to him. "Not now, darling," she whispered. "You've been so wonderful to me, taught me so much. Be content with your poor Suzanne for one day. Teach me a little more tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day."

He laughed. "You really are a most bewitching little thing, Lady Einskattle," he murmured into the sable tangle of her soft hair.

That night, by a prior invitation, the Einskattles went out to dine formally at the palazzo of a Bourbon princess of greatly advanced years. Present, also, were the British chargé d'affaires and his wife, the Brazilian ambassador to the Holy See, Cardinal Dann from Verona, three other millionaires and their spouses, and—as a delicate tribute to Suzanne's origins—a young Armenian sculptor who had made a great eclat at the previous year's Venice Biennale. The last turned up in jeans and a Mickey Mouse tee-shirt; the remaining guests were in evening dress. Suzanne was placed next to the Armenian, who speedily made it known to her that he was a Trotskyite and a homosexual, so their conversation suffered several severe blocks, since both his attitudes were forcibly held while she could take or leave either. Dinner was badly cooked, indifferently served and interminable. Einskattle made some excuse to leave the

table when the women abandoned their menfolk to the port, nuts and cigars, and he and Suzanne stole away to an empty room of staggering proportions with a ceiling painting by Tiepolo. There they made love without removing any clothing save one small garment of hers.

Their passion was quite insatiable . .

They lay in her golden bed next morning, temporarily replete after love and coffee with freshly baked croissants, as the Garbisian amphibian took off from the Giudecca and swept at roof height down the Grand Canal and over the Palazzo Sacco-Fortis. Suzanne, dreamy-eyed, registered its passing and the mildly reassuring thought that the blonde stewardess was removed from the stage.

That day they had a light lunch together at an outside table at Florian's in the Piazza San Marco, where the orchestra played classical pieces with considerable finesse. Suzanne was suddenly shocked and surprised to see a tall, statuesque figure walk past the far end of the square and disappear from sight beyond the campanile.

"Darling, I'm sure that was the Tricia woman!" she exclaimed.

"Mmmm? Where?" asked Einskattle, spearing another forkful of canellone and scarcely troubling to look round

"She just went past the front of the cathedral I'm sure it was her."

"Couldn't be They left this morning, *and* made enough noise to wake the dead More wine, darling?"

She placed her hand over her glass. "Jock, I simply *know* it was her," she said.

He shrugged. "All right Was she in uniform?" The Garbisian air crew livery was dove gray, and the stewardesses wore saucy gray derby hats tipped forward over the brow

."No, she was in a summer dress. Pink "

"How many blondes in pink do you suppose you could count in Venice this lunch hour?" he asked And, as if to validate his observation, a stream of tourists emerged from the great front doors of the cathedral They looked to be either Germans or Scandinavians, fair in coloring, and there was a mixed sprinkling of pink and near pink costuming

"See what I mean?" declared Einskattle, and grinned mischievously.

"I still think it was Tricia," persisted his bride

* * *

That night, they had their first real row

They had dined and were sitting together in a cozy swing seat in the roof garden, she snuggled on his lap with her legs stretched out and her silk housecoat unbuttoned to the waist, he gently toying with her bared breasts Jock had been drinking brandy, downing it recklessly ever since dinner

Their talk was light. Idle. She spoke of her father, excusing so much of his awfulness by reason of the traumatic experience of his childhood, when his mother and sisters were raped and slaughtered on the death march to Syria.

Instantly, Einskattle was all attention

"I never knew that," he said "Tell me about it "

"I'd rather not, darling," she said "It's not very nice Just carry on doing what you were doing So much nicer "

"But you do know the details?" he persisted

"Well, yes, more or less," she admitted ' Daddy would give them chapter and verse to anyone who'd listen, as if the telling of it would somehow drain away the horror of the memory from his mind but, of course, it never did. Naturally, he never told me when I was a child, except in the most general terms. But I used to listen in on him and Mummy when they weren't aware."

"Well—tell me."

She sat up and regarded him, instinctively drawing together the edges of her housecoat and covering up her breasts.

"Do you really want to know, Jock?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Well, where shall I begin?"

"How many people were involved?" His voice had taken on a curiously throaty quality, as if he was laboring under a considerable agitation.

"My grandfather and grandmother and their six daughters, and Daddy, whom they'd managed to hide And there were about—oh, a dozen or so of these awful brutes, the *bashi bazouks*."

' Yes, go on What did they do first, the *ba hi bazouks* '"

"They ordered them to strip, the women and girls There in the depth of winter, with the youngest one only about nine And afterward they raped them, one by one, several times over, while my grandfather was forced to look on Daddy said he screamed all the time."

"And then what?"

To her dismay and slight horror, Suzanne realized Jock was

aroused. As much to shock her partner out of his vicarious excitement as anything, she continued, "And then, when one might have thought that those poor, wretched women and girls had earned the right to be left alone with their shame and hurt, those brutes made vile sport with them."

"You mean—*torture?*"

"My grandmother, since you must hear it all, Jock, was a woman in the prime of her beauty. They tied her naked, spread eagled, across a rock. And then they flogged her breasts off with a rawhide whip."

A long silence followed, broken only by Jock's deep and labored breathing. The knowledge screamed in her mind that, far from quenching his lust, her last disclosure had only fueled it further.

"Do you want to hear more?" she whispered.

Einskattle did not answer for a while; when he did, his hands stole again to her breasts, and his white and even teeth made tentative bites upon her smooth skin.

"No, I think that was enough, darling," he murmured. "I'll tell you what would be rather amusing now."

"What?" she asked, full of sudden dread.

He delicately licked the softness of her shoulder made pink by his love bites. "What would be amusing, my angel," he said, "would be for you to have a nice tall glass or two of champagne and brandy. And then I suggest that we play a little reenactment."

"A—reenactment?" Suzanne felt her skin prickle all over.

"*Bashi-bazouks* and maidens," he said. "With you and me acting all the roles. Not too *chétif*, playful, rather. Begin with me stripping you, tearing your clothes to rags. And then the brutal rape. And then—why, what's the matter, darling?"

She had leapt to her feet, pulling her housecoat about her and regarding him with wide-eyed disbelief.

"Jock, how could you *suggest* such a thing?" she cried. "To make a mockery of those dead women and girls for the sake of—*play!*"

There was a tall glass of brandy by his elbow. He took it up and drained it dry, watching her over the rim of the glass. His cornflower-blue eyes seemed to have turned paler, they put her in mind of a wolf's eyes, predatory eyes. She backed away from him as he gathered himself to rise.

"Jock—no! Please!"

"I think the time has come, my little lady wife, to give you

a small lesson in obedience," he said, getting to his feet and almost falling over. He steadied himself and took a couple of paces toward her, hands extended to grab.

"No!"

He scowled, changed it to a leer. "Oh, yes, very much yes, my pet. Come here!"

She turned and ran pell mell down the stairs, not stopping till she had flung open the door of her own pink and gold bedroom and slammed and locked it behind her. She heard his unsteady footfalls crossing the antechamber outside, the crash when he lurched against the paneling, his rattling of the handle.

"Suzanne, darling, let me in."

She made no move, said nothing.

He knocked. "Suze, sweetie, I wanna talk to you. It's important."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and was surprised to see that her hands were trembling quite uncontrollably.

"Come on, Suze—open up. I'm your husband!" He began to push and pull upon the handle, testing the firmness of the door. "Do you hear me? If you don't open this bloody door, I'm going to break it down. I'll give you to the count of three. I know you're listening."

Suzanne pressed the palms of her hands against her face, eyes closed.

"One—two—three! Here goes!"

He assaulted the paneling with his powerful shoulder, next with his foot, cursing obscenely as he did so. But that door, fashioned by craftsmen in the fifteenth century, was made of oak and elm on a framework of solid brass and bronze to protect its owner from the intrigues of his enemies. It held fast against all Jock's efforts, even after he had broken off a chair leg and assaulted the door with heavy blows.

"All right, you timid little cow!" he shouted. "Have your own way. I'm not stuck with you tonight, thank God. There are plenty more pebbles on the beach."

With that he left. She heard him cursing the servants at the outside door, where they had doubtlessly gathered to hear and see everything—and they could scarcely have missed much. She also heard him shout for the palazzo gondolier to be summoned.

Ten minutes later, dressed in a pair of slacks, tieless, with shirt collar undone and his butter blonde hair unbrushed, he was helped aboard the gondola at the landing stairs below.

Suzanne saw him in the light of the porch lanterns, saw him glance hatefully up at her window. She drew back behind the jalousies in fear.

He called out an order to the gondolier, pointing down in the direction of San Marco Suzanne watched him, suddenly convinced that he was going to Tricia, that he had persuaded her to give up her job and remain in Venice and had probably set her up in a hotel to await his occasional pleasure Just another pebble on the beach!

Oddly, she slept well but dreamed heavily In her dreams, she was marrying Jock Einskattle all over again in St Margaret's, Westminster, with the bells chiming about her head Her father handed her over to the groom, and the ceremony proceeded It was not till the bond was sealed and she turned to regard the man whom she had married that she saw in a stunning moment of horror and revulsion the grinning head of a skull.

She awoke screaming. Nothing else not even the traumas of the previous night — seemed half so bad after that.

Jock Einskattle was not only back home for breakfast but also showered and dressed in clean linen—and contrite. At least, he acted contritely, though—true to his class and caste—he neither apologized nor gave any explanation for his behavior He merely declared that he had had a simply spiffing evening at Harry's Bar with a group of American chaps with whom he had played Liar Dice and lost a packet Suzanne could not bring herself to raise the ghost or open the stinking can of worms of the previous night, because he had contrived for a single red rose to be placed in a crystal glass by her breakfast plate, a gesture that spoke volumes to her essentially affectionate heart.

The remainder of the honeymoon followed quite a different pattern after the watershed of violence. There was very much less dalliance, much more sightseeing In the palazzo speedboat, with Einskattle at the wheel (and leaving behind him, always, a trail of swamped craft, confusion and curses), they visited most of the islands of the lagoon. They went to the eerie cemetery island of San Michele, with its dark church, mysterious monks and the graveyard where the dead are permitted to remain for only twelve years So great is the pressure for space that the old bones are disinterred and emptied upon a remote islet of the lagoon From San Michele, they went to

the glass-producing island of Murano, where the jealously guarded secrets of the ancient craft were kept, in the old days, under penalty of death. On Murano, they ate John Dory and *fritto misto* of shrimp, octopus, crabs and sardines and drank the coarse white wine of the country. In complete contrast, they stayed overnight at one of the grand hotels of the Lido, setting for Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, where Einskattle had to borrow a tie from the management before they were allowed into the dining room . . .

In the week that followed, he came to her bedroom only twice, and the encounters were joyless, for which Suzanne blamed herself. She found it impossible to disassociate the ardent, cheerful lover from the prurient, violent creature of that disastrous night. On two nights of that same week, he went out late on his own, she heard him leaving in the gondola below her window.

It was on the morning of Einskattle's second night out—a Thursday, it was, and threatening rain—that a police launch arrived at the Palazzo Sacco Fortis bearing two plainclothes officers and a trio of uniformed men. Suzanne was in a small sitting room overlooking the canal, checking over the housekeeper's menus for the coming weekend, when the butler Luigi entered with a certain air of nervousness and informed the "Contessa" that gentlemen from the police station had arrived and wished to speak with the "Conte."

Einskattle was still in bed, having enjoyed what presumably had been a more than usually protracted session with his American friends at Harry's Bar—or, as Suzanne told herself in the dark hours, with the ex-stewardess Tricia. Should he wake the Conte? asked the butler. Suzanne told him to go right ahead.

The police launch left an hour and a half later. Suzanne and Jock Einskattle met for the first time that day at luncheon.

He pecked her cheek and, sitting down heavily at the opposite end of the long table, poured himself a bumper glass of wine.

"What did the police want?" asked Suzanne, carefully dabbing butter on a fragment of bread roll.

"Oh, they're at me for speeding on the canal," groused her husband, refilling his glass. "Someone filed a complaint that our wake bashed up a couple of boats against the quay and that sort of rot. What's for luncheon?"

Something about his attitude—studiously casual but evasive

at the same time —sharpened Suzanne's sensibilities to the notion that more was afoot than damage to a couple of boats.

"Surely it didn't take an hour and a half to settle a small matter like that," she observed mildly, watching him

He flushed, and she saw the beginning of an outburst of temper, quickly checked. He shrugged. "You know how these wops are," he said. "The boats' owners aren't making a formal claim for damages but are willing to settle for about twice what it will cost to repair the damned things And the police have agreed not to press charges for dangerous driving after I had filled them up with scotch and soda It was all very time-consuming."

He's lying, thought Suzanne. But *why* is he lying? Why did the police *really* come here today?

They ate in total silence, with Suzanne pushing her food around her plate. Jock drank a lot of wine and followed that with brandy. At the end of the meal, he sat back in his chair and regarded her quizzically.

"Darling, I don't think the Venetian style suits us," he said. "I mean, we spend altogether too much time bickering We sit around and moon. We have already done the tourist bit to death As for entertaining: well, do you fancy sending Princess Louisa a return invitation to dinner —along with the British chargé d'affaires and the rest, including the Armenian chap? I ask you."

"What are you proposing that we do, Jock?" she asked him.

He shrugged "Go home. Back to Einskattle You'll love Einskattle, darling. There's lots to do there, loads of amusing people."

"But we had planned to stay here till the end of next month," she reminded him.

"I think we've had Venice," he said.

"Well, forget Venice," she said "We'd planned to go up the River Brenta. Daddy's taken a summer's lease on a heavenly baroque villa there."

She was still trying to salvage something of their honeymoon. Despite the guilty consciousness of her supposed inadequacies as the wife and lover of Jock Einskattle, she desperately hoped to arrive at some working arrangement where she could satisfy his predelictions without destroying her own sensibilities and the very foundations of the passion that had brought them together in the first place.

He shook his head. "It will still be Italy," he said "I think we've had not only Venice but also Italy. And, anyhow, they say that the Brenta's crawling with mosquitoes at this time of the year. *And* snakes—you're scared silly of snakes, aren't you?"

She hunched in her chair, defeated. "When do you want to leave, Jock?" she asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Why not, now that we've made up our minds?"

"But it will take several days to arrange for the amphibian to come and fetch us."

He laughed. "Darling, I know you're a Garbisian and all that, but there are other means of traveling from Venice to Scotland via London than going by private amphibian. People do it all the time· it's called 'public transport.'"

"Don't mock me, Jock," she said. "Just tell me what you have in mind."

"There's a scheduled flight leaving Venice airport at nine in the morning," he said "We'll be on it "

"If there are seats available," she prompted him

"The seats are—I've already booked seats," he replied.

She stared down the table at him, wide-eyed "So you already had it fixed the end of our honeymoon in Venice—before you even sat down!" she cried "And the act of *persuading* me, if one could use the term, was simply window dressing."

He grinned. the lopsided, curiously self-deprecating grin that had won her in the first place.

"I do like to get my own way," he admitted, "even if it calls for a spot of cheating and mind-bending."

That night, their last at the Palazzo Sacco-Fortis, he came to her room freshly showered, butter-gold hair slicked back, smelling of cologne And nude.

Stark naked, walking tall, he opened a bottle of champagne and, pouring out two glasses, brought them over to her bed. She lay watching him covertly, apprehension mingled with a desire that was causing her bosom to rise and fall tellingly

"To us," he said, chinking his glass against hers. "To us—and to Einskattle."

She answered his pledge, sipped the wine and raised her eyes.

"My lord, you have spiked this champagne with brandy!" she said.

"I plead guilty to the gentle impeachment, m'lady," he admitted. "You are very, very beautiful, Suzanne." Reaching out, he touched her face, stroking with his forefinger from the elegant, slight hollow beneath the cheekbone to the tip of the jaw. Suzanne shivered as if he had trailed a finger down her back —another weapon in his armory of gentle seduction.

The brandy and champagne swiftly rounded off the sharp edges of her nerves and sent doubts and fears packing. She stretched herself luxuriously against the silk pillows and watched him pad over, barefoot, to refill their glasses, this time making no attempt to conceal the fact that a large jigger of brandy went in first. She told herself that he was quite the most beautiful man she had ever seen naked, and she had seen a few. Better, even, than Freddie Hopwood. She had an impulse to fetch pen and paper from her dressing room and draw him as he stood, but she settled for tugging the neckline of her nightgown a mite lower and smiling sweetly at him as he advanced with her glass.

"Do you know, I think I'm quite stinking already," she said. "One more of these and I shall be like putty in the hands of the first man who propositions me."

"Drink up," he said, grinning.

And what, she thought, if it *has* gone badly so far? Hell, how many honeymoons live up to expectations? A honeymoon is not a roll in the hay but a first glimpse of what a marriage will be. A honeymoon often highlights the adjustments that are going to have to be made . . .

One hand about her bare shoulder, Jock was relieving her of the empty glass. He cupped her right breast and Suzanne felt the nipple rise in response to the touch and willed it to pierce his open palm. Their mouths met, hungrily. He slipped between her silk sheets and she felt the whole length of his body, muscular and hard against her yielding softness. She gasped in anticipation as he trailed one finger down her spine, lingering just below the waist.

It was as if she had been taken in the crest of a giant wave breaking upon an endless shore. Her body was entirely under the will of the great wave, which rose with breath-robbing might skyward, up and up, till the white sanded beach was far below her and she was as one with the clouds, the far mountain peaks.

Suzanne cried out in ecstasy for the beauty that had been newly revealed to her. Still moaning softly, calling his name, she felt herself gently descend into the still shallows and warmth of a white sandy shore, where she lay, replete with happiness.

When she opened her eyes, the bedside light was still on. Jock had turned over onto his other side. He was asleep and—she heard it from him for the first time—snoring loudly.

Suddenly, unaccountably, Suzanne felt like a child who had been given a candy bar as a special treat for good behavior, for doing as she had been told

They were driven to the airport in the motor launch as a fine rain fell from the low gray sky. Einskattle bought English newspapers and magazines, took Suzanne's arm and guided her to the departure gate There were two uniformed policemen standing with a dark-jowled man in plain clothes who gave a sign of instant recognition upon seeing Einskattle and, meeting Suzanne's eyes, raised his hat to her and gave a little bow

"He knows you," said Suzanne. "Was he one of those who—"

"Yes, one of the chaps who called about the damaged boats," he replied. "Nice chap Bit of a coincidence, bumping into him again. Don't like the look of the sky Bet we have a bumpy flight this morning."

They took their places in the first-class compartment of the plane, Suzanne at a window seat. Gazing out and up, she could see the group of three policemen; they were watching through the windows at the head of the ramp She met the eye of the plainclothesman and looked away. Einskattle was exerting all his charm upon a redheaded young stewardess, asking for champagne and ikra caviar. The girl, who had studied the passenger list, addressed him as My Lord and took the order without so much as a flicker of an eyelash, as if simply everyone had champagne and caviar for breakfast. Suzanne noticed the quite unashamed manner with which he continued to regard the girl's undulatory retreat up the aisle and suffered a dull remembrance of the stewardess Tricia.

"Newspaper, dear?" He passed her a copy of the *Courier*, which she took with no thought but to flip over the pages and look at the pictures during takeoff, which she always found terrifying.

A headline and a name immediately caught her eye, and she read on:

Cy Delamere's Biographer Killed

Alastair Hudd Plunges to Death in Car

From Our Special Correspondent

One of the most highly paid popular biographers in the business, Alastair Hudd, 39, of 31a Upper Brook Street, W1, fell to his death from Pendar Cliff, Cornwall, in his Lotus sports car on Tuesday night.

Mr Hudd wrote the best selling biography of former U.S fighter pilot and international press tycoon Cy Delamere, 42. The book won the Norstrand Prize for Contemporary Literature last year and is currently being filmed in Hollywood and Malaya by United Associates.

Interviewed, Mrs Hudd told our reporter that her son drove most evenings into the village for a pint of beer at the "local" and always took the cliff road. "He was not a heavy drinker," said Mrs Hudd, "and had everything to live for."

The police spokesman said that the car had been recovered but that Mr Hudd's body had not yet been found . . .

Alastair Hudd was only a name to her—but Cy Delamere . . .

She recalled his face quite plainly, as it had been at the Royal garden party. She remembered the devastating humiliation she had suffered from his and Nadia Nielsen's tongues, remembered his surely deliberate insult of a wedding present. She raised her eyes and noticed that her bridegroom was making a totally unnecessary show of tasting and approving the champagne that the redhead had brought. Noting how Jock's hand lingered a fraction too long against hers, how the redhead's lower lip was quivering with flattery induced lust, Suzanne felt a surge of uncontrollable fury that exploded in an outburst.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Jock!" she cried. "Take the bitch into the lavatory, get her panties off and have done with it!"

The honeymoon was over.

PART II

The Nightmare

Chapter 1

Castle Einskattle stands at the head of a ravine overlooking Loch Ness, and has stood there since the twelfth century. Its ten-feet thick, granite-clad walls will probably stand, in whole or in part, till Doomsday.

Angus Einskattle, Laird of Noon and Gradie, built it. Angus the Highland baron, raider, rapist, pillager and demon. They say that the blood of Englishmen was mixed with the mortar that holds the great granite blocks in place, and the well-authenticated ghostly activity surrounding the castle may bear witness to the legend. In the hellish dungeons far below the central keep was discovered, early in the present century, a deep well that was half-filled with the broken bones of tortured men, women and children. From the few pathetic artifacts found with them, they were identified as local peasantry who had fallen foul of their laird for such reasons as being tardy in paying their dues in corn, cash or young womenfolk, or refusing to disclose the hiding place of their last barrier against starvation, their seed corn.

Angus and his successors' one virtue—if it can be called a virtue, since it was manifestly inspired by self-interest—was an unshaken allegiance to the Crown, whatever Crown was in the ascendancy at the time. And the state of medieval Scotland was such that the monarch could not turn his nose up at the support of a robber baron and his small army of cutthroat Highlanders. Angus served King Robert the Third well and survived his royal master by only a year. His son Hamish, when James the First was captured by the English, opted to share his young king's captivity, accompanying him to France with the English Henry the Fifth and narrowly missing Agincourt battle. The next Einskattle fought for James the Third

against the rebels at Sauchieburn and his successor at the fatal field of Flodden, where he was cut down with his sovereign The next laird, Alec, was a favorite of Mary Queen of Scots, and, if that lady was indeed guilty of her husband Darnley's murder, almost certainly played a leading role in his dispatch.

When Mary's son James became the first king of Great Britain and Ireland, that dubious monarch, with his shambling walk, dribbling mouth and tendency to hold forth continuously about his Divine Right, created his "trusty and well beloved Walter Einskattle," the first earl of Einskattle, with a pension of five hundred pounds a year and five thousand acres of good Scottish moorland, plus a sizeable piece of the city of York, for which the earl and his successors were obliged to present the traditional peppercorn to the sovereign annually on St Hubert's day.

The year was 1603 The Einskattles could be said to have "arrived."

The arrival of the thirteenth earl and his countess from their abridged honeymoon in Venice to their Scottish seat caused a minor flurry in the press There were hints of an estrangement between the ex Guardee playboy aristocrat and his heiress bride, lately pride and joy of the scandal sheets The columnist combine known as Seymour Morell had got hold of the story about the Einskattles' row over a redheaded air stewardess in the first-class compartment of a Heathrow bound plane; but ironically, this story—one of the very few true and accurate stories concerning Suzanne was "spiked" by the features editor on the grounds of unlikelihood.

The fact was that Suzanne's outburst, and the row that had followed, brought Jock Einskattle down to earth with a jolt, he who had always imagined in his beautiful bride an easygoing personality that she certainly did not possess Perversely, the violence of her reaction rekindled his interest, since it suggested hidden depths of passion that he, a dedicated sensualist, had not so far plumbed to his advantage Two notes sounded in his mind he must be more careful in future, and there was a good chance that little Suze might be persuaded to abandon some of her lower middle-class scruples after all

They arrived at Einskattle Castle in time for dinner, having motored down from Inverness Suzanne s first impression of her new home was of dark, lowering walls set against pine-clad hills, and a great sweep of water below, with deep shadows

reflected from the far shore: the great Loch Ness, abode of sea monsters to this day.

The entrance to the castle was a massive archway at the far side of a drawbridge. It led into a courtyard where the vast slab of the main keep rose to the sky battlemented, pierced with gun ports and arrow slits. Through an enormous Gothic window that could have graced the nave of a great cathedral, the blaze of many lights could be seen.

"Welcome home, both of you." Ian Einskattle was at the threshold to greet them, Ian with his slight limp and his deferential attitude to his older brother. He kissed Suzanne formally on both cheeks and shook hands with Jock. "This is Hemstock, the estate bailiff, Suzanne," he added.

Hemstock was a big brute of a man in tweeds. Dark-eyed, ruddy-complexioned, with a shock of blue-black hair, his great paw encompassed Suzanne's proffered hand but took it as gently as if it had been a babe's.

"Pleased to meet you, m'lady." He was in his midthirties, and his dark eyes lingered upon Suzanne's bosom, whose admirable structure was clearly discernible beneath her lightweight suit and blouse.

"Well, don't let's stand here jawing in the bloody dark," growled Jock with rough good humor. "I'm dying for a drink. Care to join us, Hemstock?"

"I won't say no to a dram, m'lord," responded the bailiff. "Thanks."

The entrance hall of the keep was simply a granite box whose roof was lost in the darkness above a great circular chandelier of iron bearing half a dozen bare light bulbs. The musty smell of damp, rotting woodwork was all-pervasive. The air was chill, despite the summer's eve.

"Come into the great hall," said Ian Einskattle. "I'm afraid the place is in a bit of an uproar, but we've got a super log fire going." He met Suzanne's eyes and smiled. It struck her then, as it had at the wedding, how totally different he was from his brother, instead of the blue-eyed, Nordic blondness, Ian had soft dark eyes and olive complexion. His delicate bone structure showed in his long, slender hands and fine cheekbones.

"Great scot! What is happening here?" cried Jock as they passed through wide oak double doors into the vast chamber that was graced by the big Gothic window. At one end of the long, hammerbeam roofed hall, a tangle of scaffolding reached

ceiling high, and there was evidence of fresh plasterwork and newly revetted masonry, while sections of fine oak paneling had been removed and stacked like packs of cards against the wall. Over all, there hung a faint but pervasive reek of chemicals.

Ian looked lost, made a vague gesture of puzzlement and glanced toward Suzanne. Finding no help from that quarter, he appealed to the bailiff.

"*You'd* better tell them, Hemstock," he said. "After all, you were here when the whole thing was put in hand. When you rang me in London, I assumed that Lord and Lady Einskattle had also been informed."

"It was to have been a surprise for them, sir," said the bailiff. "Indeed, Mr. Garbisian's instructions were that all the repairs and improvements were to be finished before Lord and Lady Einskattle got back from Venice" — he glanced meaningfully from one to the other of the newlyweds—"which wasn't *supposed* to have been till the end of next month."

"Daddy's work!" exclaimed Suzanne. "Oh, Jock, I'm so sorry. How could he have presumed? . . ."

"Let him presume away," responded her husband cheerfully. "Good for papa in law. If he wants to shore up the crumbling walls of the old home, more power to his elbow. What are they supposed to be doing here, Hemstock?"

"Eradicating the woodworm and dry rot, sir," replied the bailiff. "The paneling, you see, is all being taken down and treated with antipesticide."

"That would account for the stink."

"Yes, sir."

"Marvelous, marvelous!" The Lord of Einskattle moved toward a drinks table set to one side of an enormous fireplace. "Let's drink to your dear old dad, Suzanne, darling. What's it to be—champagne?"

Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a pair of enormous Irish wolfhounds who came bounding into the hall, tails whipping, tongues a dangle, toward the earl. Einskattle greeted them with matching joy as they leaped up at him, their great paws upon his shoulders, slavering mouths seeking his face. Their names, he informed Suzanne, when some sort of order had been restored, were Castor and Pollux.

"They're — adorable," she ventured doubtfully.

"I should add, sir," said the bailiff to his master, "that Mr

Garbisian has also had the roof of the north tower releaded and the moat dredged out to six feet deep all around."

"The north tower!" exclaimed Jock. "But that damned tower's been falling down for twenty years. My father had an estimate made for the reroofing job, but since it was going to cost him more than his year's hunting and fishing, not to mention his likely losses at baccarat, he said the north tower could go to hell. Another toast for my father-in-law! Refill the glasses, Hemstock."

"Very good, sir."

"Another job that Mr. Garbisian has put in hand, Jock," said Ian, "is the complete refitting of the old kitchens That's almost finished. There's now what amounts to a modern hotel kitchen installed here."

Suzanne shook her head. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy!" she whispered.

"Speaking of kitchens," continued Ian, "you do realize, don't you, that your precipitate return has thrown all the staffing arrangements out of kilter? Apart from a handful, the rest of the staff's away on holiday."

The earl drained his glass. "Well, wire for the buggers to come back," he said carelessly. "See to it, Hemstock."

"I think I can get some temporary staff from Inverness, sir," interposed the bailiff.

"Well done, Hemstock!" cried Jock. "You'd better stay for dinner."

"That's very kind of you, m'lord," said the big man, and his dark eyes strayed toward Suzanne and looked away.

The efficient Hemstock had fixed everything Dinner was to be served in the lesser hall at nine. Suzanne departed to unpack and freshen up, and Jock Einskattle showed his bride the way.

The way led through vaulted corridors lined with dark portraits of long-dead Einskattles, up twisting staircases and through vast empty rooms hung with faded tapestries, to a private staircase leading to the earl's suite Suzanne had been apportioned a bedchamber that was not only refreshingly modest in size but also very snug and comfortable, with a four-poster bed, an eighteenth-century French sofa and matching vanity table. Stone-mullioned windows of leaded glass looked out over the wide waters of the great loch.

"Mary, Queen of Scots slept here," said Jock, pointing to the bed. "So did Bonnie Prince Charlie, and a host of other notables, now to be joined by the ravishing bride of the thirteenth earl."

He drew her to him, and she went willingly, for, after their row on the plane, things had unaccountably gone better between them. She, for her part, had experienced a release of tension; it was as if her outburst over the redhead had exorcised the dark feelings she had nourished about the stewardess Tricia, suspicions that she was now acknowledging to herself as being based on mistaken identity, jealousy and pique.

"Darling, I'm so ashamed for Daddy," she murmured against his cheek. "He just doesn't understand, you see? He thinks that money excuses everything; that it permits him to move into other peoples' homes and rip walls down, rebuild kitchens and things. I shall never forgive his appalling manners."

He laughed, kissed her. "Suze, darling, you make too much of it," he said. "I don't mind your old man showering us with money. Long live money! And in any event, the idea may have come to him through something I mentioned during the wedding reception."

"What was that, Jock?"

"Oh, I told him that Elnskattle had been badly neglected for the last couple of hundred years, what with the fifth earl wagering away our holding in York and my old man losing two million in Monte Carlo. I suppose your papa took the notion to move in and put things to rights." He met her eye, stroked her cheek. "Now, it's half an hour to dinner. What do we do? Do we bathe and change in a leisurely and civilized manner—or do we have a roll in the hay on Mary, Queen of Scots' bed instead?"

He was already unbuttoning her blouse. She drew a shuddering breath as he scooped her breasts from out of her bra and implanted a kiss upon a yearning, coral-tipped peak.

"I hope Her Majesty the Queen will approve," she whispered, as he gathered her up and carried her to the ancient four-poster.

For all that she did not like the look of the man, Suzanne had to concede that Hemstock, considering that his first and only warning of their return had been a phone call from London airport at midday, had worked wonders. In the absence of housekeeper and cook, he had drawn up a dinner menu, he had

also begged—or stolen—a chef from a hotel in Inverness and filched two waitresses from another establishment to serve at table.

Fine food presented no problems at Castle Einskattle, for its ancient cellars and game rooms and its modern deep-freeze cabinets—were storehouses of good things: fine wines dating back to the early years of the century; the produce of the Einskattle tenant farms, fresh or preserved, salted, tinned, potted; venison, grouse and pheasant that had been stalked at tremendous expense by rich Arabs on the Einskattle moorlands; not forgetting salmon and trout taken in Einskattle streams and pools.

The menu was comprised of a fresh salmon mousse, followed by fillets of peppered venison served with a garnish of cashews, raisins and *crôutes*, with a *sauce poivrade*. The wine cellar had been deprived of a classic Muscadet to go with the mousse, and a noble claret of an almost extinct vintage to grace the venison. Jock Einskattle ignored the wines and confined himself to another blessing of the cellars: an outstanding malt whiskey produced at the family's distillery, which for many years was a rich source of revenue, till his late father had sold out to one of the big international combines in order to help settle his gambling debts. Jock's heavy drinking, Suzanne noticed with some dismay, was not improving his temper. And that was odd, she thought, for their brief idyll upon the queen's bed had left her feeling as satisfied and replete as a kitten on a cushion after lapping a bowl of cream. Why, then, was Jock acting so irritable?

They were at the dessert course of summer pudding, and he had been recounting some fairly intimate and slightly scandalous tales of the comings and goings of the Royal Family gleaned from his privileged term in the Guards. Suzanne had heard most of it before, and surely his younger brother and the bailiff had also. So, thought Suzanne, he could only be showing off for the benefit of the two quite pretty waitresses who were listening, all agog, by the serving table. The earl's strident, deeply inflected, aristocratic voice resounded in the confines of the lesser hall as clearly as a parson's in a church.

He drained his glass, poured himself another and, glancing sidelong at Suzanne with a low-lashed, sly and challenging glance that she had lately come to connect with the worst of his moods, took a long pull of the potent malt and declared, "Now, my little brother, you know, got a double first at Oxford,

as well as winning all the prizes on offer, ain't that right, Ian baby?" He threw a glance at his brother, who looked down at his plate and nodded unenthusiastically. "Imagine that, Suze, sweetie – that the Einskattles, who are really only jumped-up cattle thieves and cutpurses, should have spawned a scholar. In Classics. Latin and Greek, would you believe? Never had the knack for Latin and Greek m'self, but little Ian can rattle 'em off like his own mother tongue. Not of tremendous practical use, you might think, but it comes in handy for verses on Christmas cards, gravestones, memorials and all that." He hiccuped loudly, and from over by the wall, Suzanne heard the two waitresses smother giggles. "Am I talking like a Philistine? Yes, I am a bit of a Philistine compared with little brother Ian." He poured himself another drink and addressed himself directly to Suzanne. "We're not much alike, Ian baby and I, would you say, Suze, darling?"

Suzanne shrugged, inwardly searching for a topic—any topic—that could alter the tide of her husband's surely destructive diatribe, but none would come to her mind.

"I mean, look at us—the two of us," continued the earl. He laughed, half-choked on his next swallow of malt whiskey. "We have a joke, a tremendously private joke in the family, Suze. We say that little Ian is the result of Mama's association with a handsome snake charmer when she accompanied Father to the Commonwealth conference in Delhi in the year before little Ian was born."

"That's enough, Jock!" cried Ian, but his voice broke weakly on the upper register.

"And that ain't all," continued the elder brother remorselessly. "Little Ian baby is widely considered to be a bloody faggot, which is an accusation that could scarcely be laid at *my* doorstep, as you, my dear, are in a unique position to attest to."

Another quenched duet of giggles came from the waitresses.

"Stop it, for Christ's sake!" breathed Ian.

"Darling—please!" Suzanne reached out her hand and laid it over her husband's. He snatched his away and grinned across at Hemstock, who had been listening to the diatribe with expressionless attention, slowly eating his pudding with a ruminative air.

"Do you know what they called him at Eton, Hemstock?" demanded the earl. "Do you know the nickname they gave young Master Ian?"

There was a harsh scrape of chair legs on the granite flagstones as the younger brother flung himself back and half rose

"That's enough, I say!" Ian shouted

"They called him Daphne at first," said the earl, ignoring him and turning his hooded gaze to Suzanne. "Then, when they got to know him better, the chaps changed it to Penny. Do you know why, can you guess why, they called him Penny?"

"Good night, Suzanne. I'm going to bed." Ian Einskattle's pale olive complexion was a sickly yellow in the candlelight. With a brief bow to his brother's wife, he strode with swift, unsteady steps down the hall.

The earl's voice followed him. *"They called him Penny because, like the coin of the realm, he was passed from hand to hand!"*

His victim's footsteps faded away into silence in some far recess of the ancient castle. The earl laughed and poured himself another tumbler of whiskey. There was a smothered snigger from over by the serving table.

"Jock, that was -unforgivable!" breathed Suzanne.

He contrived a look of injured innocence, though the blue eyes contained an ancient cunning. "What have I *said?*" he asked, "what have I *done* to deserve my little wifey's displeasure?" He shifted his gaze back to the big man at the end of the table. "My wife thinks I've acted like a cad, Hemstock. What do *you* think? Feel free to speak your mind, man."

The other's face was inscrutable in the candlelight, the shadow casting the deep-set eyes into twin pools of darkness.

"It isn't for me to say, m'lord," he answered.

"'It isn't for me to say, my lord,'" echoed Einskattle. He tapped the tabletop with his palm in mock applause. "Well done, Hemstock! There's a fellow who knows his place in life, my dear Suzanne. And I'll tell you his place in life if you will bend your shell-like ear in this direction for a nonce or two." He took a long swig of his whiskey and, sitting back in his great, carved chair, pointed insolently to the other man. "Friend Hemstock is a gentleman without land who has sold himself to look after another man's land. Isn't that right, Hemstock?"

"Correct, sir," came the deep voiced response.

"But a gentleman, nevertheless," continued the earl. "Thanks to my late father, who paid for him to be put through the kind of second rate school that's specially designed to turn little nobodies into reasonable replicas of gentlemen. Right, Hemstock?"

"That's right, sir."

"Indeed, you'd scarcely believe from the way he sits at table with us that his old man was a gamekeeper on the estate and his mum an upstairs maid right here in Einskattle. That's right, isn't it, Hemstock — that's what your folks were?"

The bailiff reached out and took two walnuts from the dish before him. "Quite right, sir," he replied.

The earl leaned confidentially toward Suzanne. "That mother of his—now, alas, no longer with us — what a girl!" He sketched an hourglass shape with his hands, leering obscenely sidelong at the bailiff. "Even I, young as I was, could scarcely fail to note her roseate charms. And my father's sporting guests, you know—why, she was famous among them. They all wanted the curvaceous Mrs. H. to attend to their rooms. Did you know that, Hemstock?"

There was a loud crack as the two walnuts disintegrated within the huge palm of the big man.

"If you say so, sir." The voice was as cold as ice, and Suzanne was instantly aware of the fury within. She sought about her for escape . . .

"I—I'm rather tired, Jock," she said. "I think I'll go to bed."

He regarded her unsteadily, his eyes glazed with alcohol and a shrouded malice.

"So soon?" he asked. "Do I take it that you find the conversation a little too—shall we say gamey?—for your delicate sensibilities?"

"I really am tired, Jock," she said. "It's been a long day. Good night, Mr. Hemstock. Thanks for arranging such a splendid meal at such short notice. You have taken a very great deal of trouble. No, please don't get up. Good night, Jock. Shall I see you later?"

Her husband gave no other response to her question but an airy wave of his hand. His attention was redirected to the bailiff, and, by the amused malice of his expression, the lord of Einskattle appeared to have thought up another twist to his "gamey discourse." When Suzanne reached the archway at the far end of the hall, he was addressing his companion with a note of sneering challenge.

"Dammit, Hemstock, I know the story goes that my father put you through school and agricultural college because of your old man's supposed services to him in the war, but I've always reckoned there was more to it than that. I reckon it was on

account of that damned toothsome mother of yours, Hemstock . . ."

Someone had remade her queenly four poster bed, tumbled into disarray by their late passions, and laid out her nightdress and peignoir. Suzanne stripped and put them on, her mind and heart heavily ladened by the memory of her husband's behavior at dinner his deliberate, cruel baiting of his younger brother and the vicious sideswipes at bailiff Hemstock If that was a fair dose of Jock Einskattle in his cups at his own table, then married life was going to be fraught with problems!

Unbinding her hair from its chignon, she brushed it a hundred times, watching herself in the carved and gilded mirror. She saw a woman strangely at odds with herself Was this pampered and scented creature the real Suzanne Garbisian? She was a far cry from the earnest dedicated student of art who, whenever free of her gilded penthouse prison, had been like thousands of other earnest young pursuers of the Truth The extension of *that* woman might have gone on to live and work at the walk-up flat in the rue de Bec –if her father had allowed it Instead, she had opted for marriage, for the other avenue of freedom. And her father had applauded the match.

She feared she had been blinded by a false image of freedom and had done exactly as her father had wished, as surely as if he had dictated her course.

As for Jock, he had, for all his faults, the power to summon up in her the most profound passions, the presence of which she had never guessed at, never dreamed of And yet, for all that, she had to admit that there were vast gulfs of differences already in sight between them, becoming clearer day by day as the mists of enigma were blown away by the cool breeze of familiarity.

At his best, Jock was the gallant, devil may care Guard who had gathered her up in the queen's back garden and had shown her summer fields of boundless delight beyond imagining.

At his worst and tonight at dinner, he had been quite at his worst, and had betrayed a fresh facet of his character that she might have guessed at — her husband was a bully and something of a sadist.

And there were overtones of something very much worse .

Suzanne's bed seemed very large a landscape of emptiness, which she explored with the tips of her toes, lying there in the darkness after she had switched out the lamp. The silk sheets

felt cold and unaccommodating to the touch. She closed her eyes, knowing that sleep would not come easily, then opened them again to look up at the canopy above her head. The underside had been painted in the eighteenth-century French manner of Bouchier, with nymphs and cupids transporting themselves upon solid-looking clouds. By the moonlight coming through the deeply recessed and mullioned window, Suzanne could just discern the pink and rounded forms. One of the nymphs had a body that reminded her of Alice, her maid.

Alice was on her way to Scotland, having been directed by wire from London airport to attend her mistress at Einskattle. She would arrive tomorrow. The thought of it brought a wave of well being to the countess in the four-poster bed. The silk sheets became warm and smooth to the touch, and soothed, lulled by comfortable thoughts, she closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drift into drowsiness, from drowsiness into sleep.

She awoke to what she first thought was a protracted scream, then a caterwauling that grew ever nearer and more strident. But as the mists of sleep cleared from her consciousness, the sound revealed itself to be the wild, eerie music of the Scottish highland bagpipes, awakening a thousand echoes in the night-bound fastness of the great granite keep.

Suzanne switched on the light, alarmed. It was past three o'clock.

Who? —and at this hour? . . .

Fragmented memories of haunted castles, and the more particular tales that she had heard from Jock about the ghosts of slaughtered Highlanders who were said to walk the battlements of his family stronghold, caused Suzanne to drag her footsteps hesitantly to her door and out into the lobby beyond. She fumbled for the light switch and, failing to find it, was obliged to feel for the latch of the outer door, which she slowly opened to be met with the shrill cadences of three toned drones and high pitched chanter.

"Oh, Jock!" she cried out, part in relief, part appalled.

The thirteenth earl, literally as drunk as a lord, was marching unsteadily back and forth along the corridor at the head of the private staircase, playing the pipes. He staggered and almost fell upon his next turn, which brought him face to face with the vision of his bride in her sheer nightdress, her sable hair spread in a dark cloud about her bare shoulders. The pipes faded in a sad wail of expiring drones.

He grinned vacuously "Li'l Suze!" he mumbled "My God, you look damned appetizing standing there " He came toward her, swayed sideways and struck the wall with his shoulder, dropping the bagpipes.

She rushed forward to support him and in doing so was gathered into his grasp He seized her at the waist and shoulders, his spirit-ladened breath blowing foully in her face, mixed with spittle. She fought to free herself of him, pleading that he was hurting her, but he would hear nothing of it

"There'll be great times in Einskattle, witey mine!" he declared "We'll give a highland ball, that's what we'll do. Yeah, a highland ball. Not invite all the stuffed shirts, the bloody lord's lieutenants, sodding provosts and all that nah! We'll have the *fun* people, the best kinda people when you wanna wanna have laughs . . ." He sagged in her embrace as she made a desperate snatch to hold him His hand, clawing at her left shoulder, caught the delicate fabric of her nightdress and ripped it to the waist in his falling He fell against the wainscotting, his head slumped forward on the breast of his shirt, which was stained with his own vomit

Suzanne reached down to take hold of him, but a voice halted her "I'll handle him, m'lady "

Hemstock had mounted the staircase unnoticed during his master's diatribe Stooping, he picked up the lord of Einskattle as if he were a child or a newborn deer and slung him across his broad shoulders. He looked at her from his great height

"Don't worry yourself, m'lady. I'll put his lordship to bed and tend to him " Unlike Jock Einskattle, who had not a trace of his native accent, having been taught the rudiments by an English governess before being bundled off to an English boarding school at the age of eight, the bailiff spoke with the highland lilt.

"Thank you, Mr Hemstock," breathed Suzanne The man's huge presence was disconcertingly overpowering Since he made no move but seemed to be waiting for her to add something, she went on, "I I'm afraid his—my husband was rather er—difficult tonight and was very rude to you "

She could not see the eyes that were shadowed by the heavy brow, but he was staring down at her fixedly that much she sensed.

"'Twas nothing, m'lady," he replied 'The master pays the wages and the servant must bear with the kicks Was there anything else, ma'am?"

"Thank you, no, Mr. Hemstock."

A pause. "Nothing?"

She shook her head, puzzled. He nodded and turned, preceding her into the earl's suite. He did not look behind him again, but pushed open his master's bedroom door and went in, elbowing it closed behind him. Suzanne went into her own room and, meeting her reflection in the mirror over the dressing table, saw that her husband's drunken scrabbling had ripped the shoulder strap, rendering her left breast almost bare—a fact that might have accounted for the bailiff's dalliance and his pointed offer of further service.

"Good God, he probably thought I was flaunting myself for him!"

Prudently, she locked her door.

Chapter 2

On the following morning, a golden eagle appeared in the startling blue sky over the ravine of Einskattle, slowly circling above the peaks, its great wings extended, soaring on the buoyant air. Suzanne watched it in wonder from the castle battlements, until the great and beautiful predator turned on a wingtip and made a slow, sad, flapping flight southward to the Monadhliath mountains, where the twin peaks of Càrn na Saobhaidhe and Càrn na Làraiche Maoile were dark against the morning sky. She watched the eagle's departure with an odd sense of loss, warming her hands around a mug of superb, freshly ground and brewed coffee.

She had risen early with a curious sense of anticipation, like a child on Christmas morning. Dressing in jeans and a thick sweater — for the highland air struck chill in the near-dawn — she tiptoed past her husband's door and went exploring in her new home.

She found Einskattle to be made of a central keep with three circular towers set asymmetrically about the core. Her own and Jock's suite was on the upper story of the tower that looked out across the wide expanse of Loch Ness. Around the whole cluster rose a massive, battlemented wall topped by a perilous walkway, from which in old times the defenders of the castle shot arrows and poured molten lead, scalding water and burning pitch down upon those who presumed to attack the impregnable stronghold of the warlike Einskattle clan. Beyond the walls lay a deep moat, whose granite sides were eternally scoured and polished by the river that descended the gorge and spent itself into the great loch. A far cry, all this, from the sanitized luxury of her penthouse suite in London.

From the entrance hall of the keep, she had descended a wide stone staircase to a basement, where she found the kitchen Installed there among the gleaming chrome, glass and porcelain was the temporary chef whom the bailiff had brought in from Inverness Suzanne congratulated him upon his efforts of the previous night, and the man was obviously delighted He had just made fresh coffee (its glorious aroma had guided Suzanne's footsteps there) and gave her a mugful of the splendid brew, together with an oatcake dripping with deep yellow farm butter and homemade blueberry jam. She then walked up onto the battlements of the keep, mug in one hand, jam oatcake in the other, like a little girl with a Sunday treat And there she sat, perched on the edge of the granite balustrade, munching and sipping, taking in the glory of her surroundings, stretching her heart out to the golden eagle, counting her blessings, setting her doubts to rights.

She was still there when the station taxi delivered a load of baggage and let off a statuesque woman whom Suzanne immediately recognized as her maid. She ran down to greet Alice and they embraced like sisters She was full of questions about the honeymoon guarded questions, for she had obviously picked up the innuendos from the popular press regarding a rift between the newly joined earl and countess Suzanne gaily assured her that they had had a wonderful honeymoon, but either her gaiety was too forced or the older woman knew her better than she thought, for Alice merely gave her a shrewd look and kept her own counsel Nor did the maid fail to notice the tension between the newlyweds when Jock Einskattle appeared around noon that day, deposited a chill kiss on Suzanne's cheek and demanded a large prairie oyster, swiftly followed by a large brandy and ginger ale.

Following the events of the previous night, Ian Einskattle had departed early for a stay at the estate hunting lodge near the Corrieyairack Forest, an act of family diplomacy that Suzanne understood and respected But she regretted the departure of her soft-spoken, gentle-eyed brother-in-law As for the other member of the fateful dinner party, bailiff Hemstock, he presented himself to receive orders from his lord and master on estate matters. His formal greeting to Suzanne was accompanied by a smouldering glance up and down her body, which made her feel that she was being stripped and mauled. Hemstock, she decided, was a coarse sensualist of the most obvious

kind, and a man with whom it would be prudent not to be left alone.

The new countess, in the days that followed, was gradually introduced to a way of life that was novel to her in spite of being the daughter of one of the world's richest men. It was a fresh experience to observe that total strangers —the people she passed in the street when she did her personal shopping in the village that sprawled up the gorge from the shore of the loch —accorded her the kind of respect that cannot be bought by money or kind words. Hats were doffed, folks stood aside to let her pass, there was nodding and bowing, and the more enterprising women made some attempt at curtsying. Little boys were cuffed about the ears by their parents and bidden to take off their caps to "the laird's lady." In the shops, no matter how brisk the trade, she was served immediately, other customers appeared to deem it a privilege to give place to the laird's lady. In fact, Suzanne was the recipient of a latter-day deference of the feudal kind, since, as a bride of the Einskattles, she represented a dynasty that typified the glory of Old Scotland.

It took a while for Suzanne to appreciate the impregnability of the Einskattles. The shrill voices of a modern society that began just south of the secret peaks and valleys of the Highlands found no echo in Crachie and neighboring villages, where the Einskattles and their sort — cattle thieves and robber chieftains turned aristocrats — were the linchpins of Highland life and were accorded unquestioning deference on that account. Jock was amused to recount an example of this to her: when the bones of the tortured men, women and children were found in the well below the castle, the secretary of state for Scotland was petitioned by a leftist organization, to have the remains exhumed and reinterred beneath a monument that would be visible for miles and would remind passersby of the ancient iniquities against the common people that were still being perpetrated upon the downtrodden proletariat and peasantry. Permission was granted for the reinterment — and then the trouble began. Without any prompting from the Einskattles, the folks of the hills and valleys, and the villagers of Crachie in particular, rose in concerted fury at the thought of their ancestors being buried out on the moors, no doubt to the accompaniment of the heathenish rights connected with Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and *that* lot. The Church of Scotland was petitioned to inter-

vene, with the result that the ancient bones were finally laid to rest in Crachie churchyard. The revolutionaries' last stand was to have an inscription carved upon the headstone reading:

> Here lie innocent men, women and children of the working class, slaughtered at the whim of their oppressors
> Workers of all lands, unite!

But this was similarly defeated by the locals' sense of propriety toward the Einskattles, and the headstone bears to this day the simple injunction:

> Rest in Peace.

That the feudal power of the Einskattles had in no way diminished was further demonstrated when the Earl, disregarding his younger brother's views, caused telegrams to be sent to the domestic staff of Castle Einskattle, recalling them to their duties before their holidays had expired. What is more, the summonses were obeyed with only one exception, that of an underfootman and a still room maid, man and wife, who resolutely declined to be shifted from their last week of vacation and mailed their resignations. But, as the comment went in the staff sitting room at the castle afterward, those two were, after all, only Lowlanders from Edinburgh, scarcely better than Sassenachs, and disloyalty was only to be expected from such as they.

Having strained and tested the loyalty of his servants to a fair degree and found it not wanting, the thirteenth earl then proceeded to issue invitations to a Highland ball in honor of his new bride.

"Jock, you can't *possibly* go to the ball with no pants on under your kilt!"

He was in her dressing room, posturing in front of a mirror in full Highland evening dress, while she put the finishing touches to her makeup. He wore a short black velvet jacket with black frogging and silver buttons and Valenciennes lace at throat and cuffs. His kilt and plaid were "Dress Einskattle," which is a tartan of great complexity, mainly scarlet, black and white. He had lifted up his heavily pleated kilt to scratch his

backside and had revealed to his astonished young wife that he was wearing nothing under.

He grinned. When sober, Suzanne thought, he had a most winning way of grinning. "Darling, I would shame all my family, friends and tenants if it were discovered that I wore anything under the kilt," he said.

"You mean . . ."

"It's the custom," he declared. "Scotsmen don't wear anything under their kilts. I would have thought that even a little Armenian kitten like yourself would have known *that.*"

"How rude," she said, smiling.

"It's always been so," he said. "Wellington's Highlanders fought in the snows of Torres Vedras with manhood bare beneath the kilt. In Highland regiments it is not only an affectation but also a regulation. First thing on parade, the sergeant major goes down the line of soldiers trailing a little mirror on the end of a stick, which he places at the feet of every man And woe betide the man if he catches a glimpse of knickers "

By now, they were both laughing, Suzanne almost uncontrollably.

"There was this English girl," continued Jock, "who went up to this Highlander and asked him, 'Please, is it true that — I mean —*do* you or *don't* you?' And the Scottie grinned down at her and said, in his thick brogue 'Missie, ah'm a man o' few wor-r-rds *Give us your ha a-and* '"

"That is rude, rude, rude!" said Suzanne. "And you've made me laugh so much that my mascara's running and I'll have to do it all over again."

"Can I stay and watch?" he asked, settling himself down on the stool beside her and slipping his hands round her slender middle.

"If you behave yourself," she said, dabbing at her ruined cheeks with a tissue And, when his fingers stole to the tongue of the zipper at her back, "Jock, don't play, darling. It's past eight o'clock and they'll be here by now, the early ones "

"Let 'em wait," he said "Those who come early are the thirsty buggers after the booze, and they'll find plenty of that to compensate."

"To compensate for what?"

"For having to wait for their host and hostess "

"While their host and hostess do *what?*" she demanded. "Oh, Jock, Jock!" she asked, as she felt the zipper whisper down to her waist, "what am I going to *do* with you?"

"Ah'm a man o' a few wor r rds," responded Jock Einskattle in a very commendable imitation of his native Highland brogue. "Give us your ha-a-and, lady."

It was going to be all right, she told herself. Not like that dreadful dinner the night we arrived, even though Ian was present and in his Highland evening dress like the rest, including bailiff Hemstock, who, with his dark, angry eyes, resembled a great bear in kilt. Suzanne avoided his glance.

They were an hour late in appearing before their guests. An hour of the most — to Suzanne — pleasing kind. Jock had been his most unselfish and attentive self, deferring to her needs, not obliging her to step beyond the boundaries that her temperament and inhibitions imposed upon her. In gratitude for his considerateness, she had smilingly gone along with his grinning suggestion that she, also, wear nothing under her skirts that night. It was a casual, joshing request, easily agreed to, no more than a secret to exchange winks about across a crowded room, a flippant piece of naughtiness forming a private bond.

The ball was being held in the great hall, arguably the largest and finest in the Highlands, now refurbished by courtesy of Aram Garbistan. Three hundred people were present, and there was ample elbowroom for everyone. A seven piece band played popular airs, and everyone milled around exchanging scandal and gossip, drinking mostly champagne and whiskey. In the gallery high above, the staff of the Einskattle estate were permitted to watch their betters at play. Suzanne saw Alice up there and waved to her maid, who returned the salutation.

"Saze, darling, I'd like to present Nicky McAlistair." Jock was introducing a handsome young devil with a deeply tanned countenance from out of which a pair of blue eyes and a mouthful of perfect teeth crinkled and flashed an admiring greeting. "And this is Tam Hagan. A couple of rackety guys who come hunting and shooting with me."

Tam Hagan was a duplicate of Nicky McAlistair, only colored green and ginger. Come to think of it, thought Suzanne, the three were a perfect trio. They all looked the kind of likely lads against whom prudent mothers warn their daughters — and mostly in vain.

"Did you have a good time in Venice?" asked McAlistair, blue eyes darting in and out of her cleavage.

"Tremendous," replied Suzanne. "Jock was an absolute daredevil with the speedboat and wrecked everything else in

sight. In fact, I've an idea that the police were glad to see us go. In any event, they sent a farewell party to escort us off the premises, didn't they, Jock? What's the matter, darling?"

Einskattle had not taken her light jest in the spirit in which it had been offered. He glowered down at her.

"What a damn silly thing to say!" he declared, and turned on his heel and stalked away toward the drinks table.

"Jock is not amused," said McAlistair. "One recognizes the symptoms."

"It was just the same," said Hagan, "when that beater was accidentally peppered in the backside during last year's opening grouse shoot and someone joked that old Jock couldn't tell a grouse from an ass."

"Excuse me," said Suzanne, and left them.

She found her husband in a group by the drinks table. He downed a whole tumbler full of whiskey as she covered the last half-dozen steps that separated them. His eyes met hers over the top of the tumbler.

"Darling," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, I really am. It *was* a damn silly thing to say —you're quite right. Don't let's quarrel — mmm?"

For an instant, she thought that she had lost communication with him. He frowned. His hand, holding the empty glass, went out toward the waiter serving drinks. And then a roll of drums and a skirl of pipes electrified the gathering.

"My lords, ladies and gentlemen, Lord and Lady Einskattle will open the ball with—the Eightsome Reel!"

"Come on, Jock!" She took his hand in hers and pulled him gently away from the drinks table, squeezing his palm intimately, smiling up into his eyes Like a sullen schoolboy put to shame by kindness, he returned a half-reluctant grin.

They formed the first eight on the floor with McAlistair, Hagan and their ladies. Ian Einskattle and an extremely plain girl whom Suzanne had not met completed the group. A crash of drums and they were away to the lilting air of "Captain Ewing's Farewell," with Suzanne and Jock first to the center.

Highland dancing had the power to excite her exotic blood. It was a newfound accomplishment, learned from "The Laird's Piper," ex-Pipe Major Hamish McDougal, late of the Scots Guards, who had given her lessons in the great hall every afternoon for the past fortnight. After the first figure, the rest joined in, till the wide, flagged floor was a moving tracery of couples' turning, whirling, kilts shirring, the women with the

silk tartan shawls of their clans streaming free; eyes hot, breath panting, mouths slack with exertion and animal excitement.

Swirling, Suzanne saw the sea of faces at the edge of the floor as a smear of color. Slowing, they became people again, individual faces. Six faces, then five, four, three, two . . .

One face . . .

"Hey—that's not the step, Suze!"

"Ooops, sorry, Lady Einskattle! Did I tread on your toe?"

"Come on, Suze—you're holding up the works!" Jock snatched her hand and dragged her to the center Somehow, they fudged their way back into the correct part of the figure while Suzanne concentrated on pulling herself together. The sight of one face had her acting like a silly schoolgirl. The figure ended, they moved sedately into the next. She had time now to steal a casual glance at the edge of the floor close by the great staircase and check if she had been mistaken.

Yes, it was he Standing back from the edge of the floor, one arm looped negligently over the bottom balustrade of the stair, a thin cigar in the corner of his mouth. Almost the only man present not in Highland dress, he was in white tie and tails, with a white carnation. His bronzed face was startlingly dark above the starched white shirtfront. And he was looking straight at her.

The reel finished with a flourish. Bow to your partner, bow to the company. "I think I should like a cool glass of champagne, Jock," she said.

"Don't go away I'll be back," he replied, going in search of a waiter.

She deliberately kept her back to the staircase and willed herself not to look directly at the people milling around her lest she become drawn into conversation at this critical moment. The intensity of her actions frightened her

By a prickling of her skin and a stirring of the hairs at the nape of her neck, she *knew* the instant he came close to her He swam into view with his startling white shirtfront, his sun-bronzed, weatherbeaten face.

"Lady Einskattle, hello again You may remember me—Cy Delamere?"

"Of course " She turned to regard him, seemingly composed. "How nice of you to come, Mr Delamere." And gave him her white-gloved fingers.

"In fact, I'm a gate crasher," he said "I'm staying with the

McWhirters for the grouse shooting and they brought me along as an appendage. Hope you don't mind."

"Delighted!" she said. "Ah, here comes my husband. Jock, darling, you remember Cy Delamere. We invited him to the wedding, but he couldn't come. Didn't you bring my champagne, pet?"

"Not yet, I'm going now, darling," replied Einskattle. "Hello there, Delamere. Glad you could come. Back in a minute." He went away to the drinks table. She was alone with Delamere again; indeed, it promised to be a long encounter as Jock was pounced upon by three pretty and excited girls who enveloped him the kind of bantering flattery that Suzanne knew her husband could never resist.

"And how is *Doctor* Neilsen?" asked Suzanne, deliberately emphasizing the woman's academic title.

"Very well when last I saw her," responded Delamere. His eyes were gray and grave as he regarded his hostess.

"It was kind of you to give us her books as a wedding present," she said. "Sorry, but we haven't yet got around to sending out formal letters of thanks."

"I hope you enjoyed the books," he said. Surely he was mocking her, laughing inside.

"I quite devoured them," she replied. "In fact, you could say I attacked them at once. Quite irresistible."

"Nadia's very sound on monetarism," said Delamere.

"I'm sure she's very sound all round," said Suzanne.

The pipes were now playing "The Dashing White Sergeant." She and Delamere stood aside to allow a stream of people to take the floor. They found themselves under the archway of the great carved wooden screen at the end of the hall, from which they could look out over the backs of the folks thronging the edge of the floor. The archway had a certain closed in, intimate ambience; she could smell the tang of the cologne that he wore.

"Something reminded me of you," she said. "What could it have been? Oh, I remember—I read how your biographer killed himself in a motor car somewhere."

"That's right," replied Delamere. "Poor old Hudd. Tragic thing to have happened, and quite unaccountable. The car was smashed to pieces, no clue as to the cause, and the body's not been recovered, nor ever will be now . . ."

His voice washed over her so that she heard only the tune

and not the words. She was not remotely interested in the sad fate of biographer Hudd; instead, she watched how his face — a very lived-in face — expressed every nuance in passing. Yet his eyes — they were dark gray, almost black, and she had not noticed that the first time they had met — were forever steady, possessing a great inner calm.

And then another voice. Loud and drunken . . .

"So that's the answer — *that's* why the honeymoon in Venice was cut short." The voice of Jock's friend McAlistair.

"Jock up to his old tricks again, I s'pose." That would be Tam Hagan.

"That bugger just can't keep off it. Remember that business at Oxford?"

"Dear boy, do I *not?*"

Impulsively, Suzanne's hand went out and squeezed her companion's forearm in an unmistakable signal for silence. Delamere stopped in midsentence, but, stooping low, he murmured in her ear, "Is this wise? Are you sure you want to hear any more?"

For answer, she motioned him to be quiet.

"Remember the night of the Commem Ball?" came the voice of McAlistair from round the side of the archway. "The cops were involved then, too. It took the vice chancellor himself and all the king's horses and all the king's men, not to mention the name of Einskattle, to hush that one up and keep old Jock from appearing in the dock." There was laughter.

"He's crazy for it. Do you suppose the little bride knows?"

"I doubt it. I don't get the impression, do you, that he married her for anything but the money? He was really up against it, you know. Owed simply *everywhere;* creditors queuing up at Chelsea barracks to dun him. They'd have cashiered him from the Guards on that alone, if it hadn't been for — the other thing."

"Lucky thing it never made the papers."

"Say what you like about the Brigade, they've got style. They may kick you out, but they never let you down. How about another brandy and champagne?"

"You're on. Einskattle's outdoing himself tonight — on the little Armenian chick's money."

Suzanne's grip tightened on Delamere's arm, not till then did she realize that she was still holding him. Hagan and McAlistair sauntered past, bound for the drinks table, still chat

tering together. The band struck up again: woodwind and violins only, without the pipes.

"Will you dance?" asked Delamere. "I don't have the competence for the Highland variety, but to my cracked ear this has the unmistakable sound of a good old waltz."

"Yes, please," whispered Suzanne.

The hand that took his was trembling with shock and anger, with shame and humiliation. If he had made any reference, however oblique, to what they had both overheard, she would have run from him and from that place; but he did not. He led her onto the floor, and, without any word or preamble, guided her into a passable waltz.

Her mind raced . . .

"Jock up to his old tricks again." What old tricks? That appalling pair had presumably taken their cue from her lighthearted remark about the police seeing them off from Venice. *That* was the remark to which Jock had taken such violent exception! . . .

Had they, indeed, been bundled out of Venice and Italy on account of Jock's "old tricks?" The "old tricks" that had nearly landed him in the dock during his undergraduate days in Oxford, and from which it had taken the might and majesty of the vice-chancellor to extricate him?

Delamere guided her round the corner by the drinks table. A glance showed her Jock still immersed in his trio of debutantes, who were pandering to him quite shamelessly and in whose attentions he was basking with all the delight of a pig rolling in the muck and having its belly tickled with a stick.

The waltz ended with a subdued clash of cymbals. Her partner twirled her to a halt.

"Come and have a word with the McWhirters," he said.

"Yes."

The McWhirters were Colonel and Lady Felicity McWhirter. She was short of breath, middle aged, a daughter of a marquess. Suzanne had met her only twice before and, observing the way that the gallant colonel eyed other females, felt rather sorry for her. Her ladyship lit a cigarette from the butt of the one she had half finished. She eyed Suzanne with something like hostility.

"I feel all out of kilter with your guest list," she declared. "Half of them I know by sight, the other half are complete strangers."

If only she knew, thought Suzanne, that it was on a whim that she and the colonel had been included in the guest list. Jock wished to keep out those he referred to as "the stuffed shirts, the bloody lord's lieutenants, the provosts," into which category the McWhirters probably fell But their daughter Sally-Anne was one of the trio of debutantes with whom Jock was basking in the muck, and it was for her sake—there was no doubt about it now that the McWhirter clan had been invited.

Lady Felicity drew on her cigarette and coughed horribly. She mumbled that it would not be long before they left, an announcement that filled Suzanne with a sudden sense of loss, for she had a premonition that the night was, after all, going to end up a disaster.

If the McWhirters went, taking Cy Delamere with them to whom could she then turn for support?

Lady Felicity had accurately sized up the gathering and had gauged the outcome.

For a start, the mix was mostly young, and mostly under thirty. With a few exceptions, the local landed gentry were represented only by the cadet branches, with a rather rackety younger son in public relations or the wine trade accompanied by an unknown chit of a girl as the archetype Jock Eriskattle had fixed it so.

By midnight, sedate Pipe Major McDougal succumbed to the amount of whiskey he had downed between numbers and fell asleep in a quiet part of the labyrinthine castle known only to himself His aide took over direction of the music, he was a young sprig who had served a term with the Black Watch and knew a thing or two about making a Highland ball go with a swing Under his baton, the music grew wilder, louder Partners were really swung around Whoops and screams accompanied the jigs and reels. A slow waltz was shouted down and died at the tenth bar, to be replaced by "Strip the Willow," danced at a rush Meanwhile, from over by the drinks table, Jock Eriskattle and his cronies were offering the alternative delight of a barbershop chorus that began with "The Eton Boating Song" and regressed, by way of sundry locker room ditties, to the unspeakable It was during the second refrain of "Eskimo Nell" that Lady Felicity gathered up her shawl, tossed her head and, presenting Suzanne with a set of nicotine-stained fingers, declared that they were leaving.

Suzanne glanced towards Delamere, who was talking to the

McWhirter girl and her escort, a chinless, grinning lout with hairy knees When they left him, she went over

"Must *you* go?" she asked, despising herself for her inconcealable fear and desperation She tried to stop herself from being so blatant.

"I'm afraid so," he answered "There's a helicopter calling for me at first light and I must be in Frankfurt by noon tomorrow " His steady, dark gray eyes looked down at her "Thanks for the party and thanks for the dance Oh—and another thing . . ."

"Yes " She knew what was coming

"I was well into my declining years before I figured that it was a waste of time to eavesdrop on what other people are saying. They should be saying nice things, but they never do And it's invariably all lies."

You should know, Suzanne thought bitterly You called me "silly little thing" and laughed when the Nielsen woman described my father as a "common little wog" and a crook, and me as an "oversexed little slut."

"I'll try to remember that, Mr. Delamere," she said flatly, giving him her hand "Thanks for coming Do give my best regards to Dr Nielsen when next you see her "

They departed, Lady Felicity leaving her daughter to the dubious care of the chinless, grinning lout Suzanne forced herself not to follow them with her eyes as they left the hall, with Delamere bringing up the rear But when they had gone, she ran to the cloakroom at the far end of the hall to look through the window at the courtyard and drawbridge. She watched the McWhirters' chauffeur open the door for his master and mistress, saw the tall figure of Cy Delamere stoop to get in beside the driver, watched as the limousine rolled slowly out of the yard, under the archway to the bridge and out into a night of blustery rain. She had never felt more alone.

When she returned to the great hall, the ball had taken a further lurch toward anarchy.

The band, which had been playing nonstop all night, had retired downstairs for their supper. The stage had been taken up by Jock and his cronies at the drinks table, including Hagan and McAlastair, the three debutantes and the McWhirter girl's lout Jock, glass in hand, was demonstrably more sober than any of them but the more dangerous for that. He was providing entertainment, devising crazy improvisations He placed three

chairs one on top of the other, which he then mounted with commendable skill without overbalancing The McWhirter girl, attempting the same —with skirt tucked up round her waist to show her suspender belt and knickers—fell from the second chair and was caught by a whooping trio of young blades who demanded —and got frenzied kisses and passionate fumblings in return.

"And now," shouted Jock Einskattle, with a dangerous look in his eyes, "we'll play the necktie game "

The proposal received a mixed reception.

"Oh, *not* the necktie game again!"

"Boring! Boring!"

"Yes, *let's!* It's such fun, and tremendously thrilling!"

"Who's first?"

"I'll try it. Damn me if I don't win out this time!" The latter speaker was Tam Hagan.

"Get a rope Get a rope!" cried the master of Einskattle.

A stout manila rope was brought by bailiff Hemstock, who proceeded to tie one end of it in a classic hangman's noose. The other end he threw over one of the massive oak beams that spanned the hall A chair was brought and was placed under the noose.

"Step forth, Tam!" cried Ian Einskattle "Let's see if you can save your damned life."

Suzanne felt her flesh crawl and the palms of her hands grow damp as Tam Hagan stepped up on to the chair, a daredevil grin on his vacant, semidrunken countenance. He grinned slightly less as the noose was placed over his auburn thatch of hair and drawn tightly about his throat

"Give the laddie the other end of his rope!" ordered Jock Einskattle.

The rope was now looped over the beam, drawn taut and the loose end placed in the hands of the man on the chair

"Speak out when you've got the weight, Tam," said the earl.

Hagan pulled gingerly on the rope, raising himself up on tiptoe, till he had the weight of his body shared between his hands and his neck. It took him quite a while; Suzanne had the distinct impression that the volunteer's enthusiasm was visibly flagging.

"When he's ready, they'll take the chair away," came a voice at her elbow Suzanne gave a start and turned to see

Hemstock standing there His smouldering dark eyes were fixed on her.

"And what happens then?" she asked. "I really don't see the point."

The bailiff grinned. "All he has to do to prevent himself from being slowly strangled is to let go of the end of the rope."

"Well, of course," said Suzanne "That's simple to do."

Hemstock shook his head "Not so," he said "I've played the necktie game several times under his lordship's direction It looks easy, but it isn't. Something happens in your mind when they take that chair away. You simply can't convince yourself that when you let go you aren't going to hang As soon as you slacken your grip on the rope, you see, an extra strain comes on your neck You have to let go *quickly*, but there's not many who can bring themselves to do that. Most of 'em have to be lifted down. But I think Mr. Hagan will make it this time he's done it before, you see."

"I think it's—a terrible game," breathed Suzanne.

Hagan's face had by now taken on a bright brick-red hue. He looked toward Einskattle and mouthed "Ready." An instant later, the chair was removed from under him, and he hung there for perhaps three seconds in a deathly silence broken only by his own wheezing intakes of breath And then it was all over: he released his hold of the rope by jerking his hands open, and landed on his feet unharmed.

Tension in the vast chamber was released like the bursting of an inflated paper bag Everyone seemed to be lighting cigarettes and laughing with an edge of hysteria.

"Well done, Tam."

"Who's next?"

"Oh, not again—I still think it's a boring game Let's play Murder, like we did last time."

"One more go—who's it to be?"

Silence No one seemed keen to take Tam's place on the chair, under the swinging noose. Jock Einskattle looked about him, a secret, twisted smile on his lips. Suzanne thought. This is it. This is where everything starts to go awry, like the bit at dinner on our first night here when he started picking on his brother.

Einskattle's bright eyes scanned the row of watching faces, his moving finger pointing. It stopped, and some tipsy youth declared that he damn well wasn't going to make a fool of

himself. The finger moved on. And stopped, pointing at Ian Einskattle.

"My little brother will have a go!"

"I—I'd rather not, Jock," replied the other His sallow face looked curiously pinched in the shifting light and shadows. Suzanne was put in mind of a wretched dog, cringing and hang-tail, being threatened with the whip.

"Come on, Ian!" urged one of the girls.

"Don't be chicken!"

His companions were pushing him forward He resisted feebly and smiled falsely, as if to ingratiate himself with his tormentors and win his freedom. But they pulled him to the chair and, because he had difficulty in raising his lame leg, lifted him up and put him there

Suzanne closed her eyes and willed the vision to go away; she wished for one man in all that company to stand up and defend poor, crippled Ian Einskattle. There was none. There was only she.

When they put the rope around his neck, she brushed past the mocking crowd and confronted her husband. He raised a wry eyebrow when he saw the expression on her face He knew what she was going to attempt.

"Don't do it, Jock," she breathed. "Not to Ian "

He sneered. "Wifey mine, you really must learn not to overdramatize everything Old Penny is going to get a bad scare when he tries to let go of that rope, but he won't come to any real harm."

"*Please,* Jock."

"Out of the way, baby, the big show is about to commence " He pushed her aside, roughly, either by intent or because of the amount he had drunk She would have fallen but for Hemstock, who caught her and held her to him for a moment longer than was necessary.

"Can't you stop him?" she pleaded

"Have you tried to stop his lordship from doing anything he's set his mind upon, m'lady? His lordship will be amused, no matter what," replied the bailiff.

By raucous coaxing, they had managed to get the victim to support himself upon the rope. The chair was whisked away. He hung there, slowly oscillating, his mouth working, his fingers scrabbling on the rope.

"Let go, Penny!" shouted the lord of Einskattle above the chorus of catcalls "You can't stay up there all night."

But he could not let go—that much was obvious. With every frightened, tentative slackening of his grip upon the rope, the cruel noose about his neck grew tighter. His mouth was trembling. One more attempt, and he began to scream quietly: a wailing, keening sound, totally unhuman, more like the cry of some wild animal heard at night from across a desolate wilderness of plain.

"He'll never make it. Better lift him down," said someone

"No—he stays!" Jock Einskattle extended his arm between his suspended brother and a would-be rescuer. The keening continued.

"Drop, you bloody fuggot!" shouted the lord of Einskattle. *"Let go, or hang!"*

Jeering and triumphant, Jock threw the contents of his whiskey glass into his brother's face as a libation. Horrified, the company watched in silence as the suspended man became ever more frenzied in his efforts to release the rope and further added to his torment by so doing.

It was Suzanne who broke the spell. Pushing aside those in front of her, she reached out and seized hold of the wildly thrashing legs and supported them, disregarding her husband's angry cry. Ian weighed very little.

"Let go, Ian—I've got you!" she cried

He sagged into her arms and toppled to the floor, sobbing for breath She stooped, and with the corner of her own tartan shawl wiped the foam flecked lips

"Are you all right, Ian?" she asked him.

"Of course the bugger's all right!" interposed her husband "It's just that he's got back trouble—a yellow streak right up the middle of it."

This sally won an appreciative guffaw from his listeners Suzanne paid him no heed but helped Ian to his feet. He was trembling like an aspen, but his face was composed He seemed uncaring of his brother's ranting and unaware of the others

"Thank you, Suzanne," he said quietly "Good night." So saying, he walked steadily past the row of faces, down the length of the hall and out through the screen. After a moment's hesitation, Suzanne started to follow her brother-in-law but was prevented by her husband roughly grabbing her wrist

"Jock you're hurting me!" she protested

"Damn that!" he replied. "Where do you think you're going?"

"After Ian," she said. "To make sure that someone looks after him."

"That you're not!" he declared. "We keep servants for that. You're staying right here with your guests. Ah, the band is returning! Take your instruments in hand, my merry men. What we are going to have now—*is the cancan!*"

"The cancan!" Whoops of delight greeted his announcement. Released of his cruel grip, Suzanne leaned back against the wall, defeated. A waiter swam into her view with a glittering tray.

"Champagne, your ladyship?" The fellow was grinning contemptuously, having seen and heard all.

She shook her head brusquely; looked away from him.

"Watch this, dear Suze," said her husband. "This will be good."

A chord from the orchestra, signaled by their conductor, and onto the floor capered McAlistair and Hagan, the McWhirter girl's loutish escort and another youth of the same kidney. They must have been expecting Jock's announcement. All four were in stocking feet. They had also borrowed makeup and painted their eyes and cheeks and rouged their pouting lips. The effect was indescribably decadent and epicene.

Another chord, a roll of drums and the quartette linked arms. Then, with the opening, crashing bars of Offenbach, they began to high kick. The audience went wild, clapping in time. The women screamed to them to go higher, higher. Finally, responding to the importunities, the four dancers unlinked arms, gathered up the skirts of their kilts and *really* high-kicked. The resultant din was tremendous, and the whole room was jigging in unison, whistling, screeching and catcalling the while. No prude, she, but Suzanne deliberately looked away from the spectacle of the flying kilts, which bared the dancers to the hips and revealed four items of shameless, prancing manhood.

At the end of the spectacle, the dancers were engulfed by adoring, moist-mouthed girls and couples began to drift away to quiet corners off the great hall. This signaled the start of a situation where modesty, prudence, marriage vows and all the rest became mere words floating around in a morass of drunken license. Suzanne yearned to be away from it all, but she did not dare to make a move, for fear of focusing Jock's attention upon her.

Jock was master of the revels again.

"Right, you enjoyed the cancan," he shouted. "The boys have shown their mettle"—pause for a laugh—"and now it's up to the girls to do the same. Waiter, bring on the champagne!"

At his command, a drinks trolley was rattled to the middle of the floor, bearing a dozen or so magnums of champagne. Picking up a bottle, Einskattle continued his spiel. "This is a game for the ladies, and your hostess, my charming lady wife, will be presenting a bottle of champagne to all the winners of this very simple game. Come forward, Suze darling! Give the lady a big hand, folks!"

Raucous applause greeted Suzanne as she walked across the floor, as if she were treading the path to a gallows.

"What are the rules of the game, Jock?" someone called.

"No rules!" responded the master of revels. "Ladies, the die is already cast. There are some of you who just can't win, and some who just can't lose." He raised the bottle on high "This magnum for the first girl who can demonstrate that she didn't put panties on tonight!"

Laughter, hoots, whistles, catcalls. One girl was shoved forward, but she laughingly declared—with discernible regret—that she did not qualify, and proved the same by lifting her skirts.

"Come on, ladies!" cried the lord of Einskattle. "Don't be shy. Tell you what ··· you need the stimulus of an example." His drink-clouded eyes turned to Suzanne, standing at his side "How about you breaking the ice, sweetie?"

She shrank away from him, shaking her head, willing the outrage not to be happening; but he imprisoned her waist with one arm and snatched at her skirt. Suzanne fought wildly, but Jock transferred his arm from her waist to her shoulders and then to her neck. Her head was being forced back, and his forearm pressed chokingly against her windpipe. No game, this, but malevolent reality. The guests of Castle Einskattle, the grinning waiters and the boys of the bank, watched in shocked silence as the lord of Einskattle fought his wife and then bared her from hem to waist for all to see.

It was an effort to still her trembling hands to stuff the small suitcase with a few things to see her as far as London Pull yourself together, girl. Get a grip on yourself Think. Think. She met her haunted face in the leaded window of her bedroom, reflected clearly against the darkness and tempest outside. A gale was blowing, the wind moaning in the chimney and the rain lashing against the granite sides of the old tower. She did not relish driving to Inverness to await the first plane that left for London in the morning—not with her nerves in this shat-

tered state For the first time that evening, she craved a stiff drink to steady herself.

She had to escape Anywhere. London for a start, to the house in Sloane Square, which Daddy had kept open for use as a *pied-à-terre* God, if only she could control her trembling! She wondered whether she should take the maid with her but decided against it. Better to be alone, to think things out rationally. She would leave Alice a note, and maybe send for her to come later.

She took a last look around the bedroom. She had everything she needed. overnight case, car keys, money, credit cards. She was dressed sensibly in slacks, sweater and a suede leather driving coat and beret.

She scribbled a note to Alice, which she put in an addressed envelope and left on the bedside table

The raucous sound of music met her halfway down the staircase. The Highland ball had greatly changed character since she and Jock had taken the floor in the decorous Eightsome Reel all those hours — it seemed a lifetime — ago. She drew back into a curtained alcove on a half-landing to await the passing of a laughing couple, man and girl, the latter with her arms wound tightly round her swain's neck as their lips clung together like desperate goldfish As they passed close by her she saw, with no appreciable reaction, that the man was her husband.

She passed quickly through the great hall She could see couples entangled upon sofas and window seats, even the floor, entwined in serpentine ecstasy, concealing no part of their abandonment.

The great, double main doors were barred and bolted and made an unconscionable racket when they were opened during a night of wind and rain. Hunching her shoulders, hefting her suitcase and sinking her chin into the collar of her coat, Suzanne ran across the courtyard in the direction of the old mews coach houses, now a twenty-car garage, where her new TR7 sports car was waiting to whisk her away from a bad scene, a bad marriage.

"Who's that? Who's there?" The challenge greeted her as she entered the garage, she recognized the voice.

"Ian, it's me, Suzanne."

"Suzanne!" She saw his face in the pale loom of his dashboard lights He was half in and half out of a TR7 that was parked close by her Mini He switched on his headlights and,

catching her in their beam, revealed a woman in flight, suitcase and all. "Where are you *going?*"

"Away," she replied. "Perhaps forever. I'm not sure. I haven't thought that one through yet All I know is, I want out tonight. And you?"

"I'm leaving, too," he said. "But I hope you're not going on my account."

"No," she said, drawing a deep, shuddering breath "After you had gone, Ian, I became the next—victim."

"I see."

"I think you do," she said.

"I've seen it often."

"I'll *bet* you have."

"Where are you going, Suzanne?"

"I'm catching the next plane out of Inverness for London."

"So'm I. Come with me Let's go together "

She breathed a sigh of release and relief. "Oh, how could I refuse?" she said. "The prospect of driving alone tonight . . ."

He took her case, and put it into the back of the little car with his own luggage. "Tonight," he said, "I'm shaking the dust of Einskattle from my feet forever. Let's go, Suzanne."

He drove out of the courtyard, over the dark bridge, and up the winding, rutted road that led to Inverness. They left in silence, with only night, the rain and the swish of the windshield wipers to intrude upon their private thoughts.

It must have been on such a night, thought Suzanne, and in a like manner that Mummy ran away for the first time. She remembered it well: how her repeated questions to her nanny regarding her mother's whereabouts had elicited responses like "Mummy has been called away on urgent business." She was ten at the time and old enough and experienced enough in the ways of her parents to know that yet another crisis had arisen in their stormy relationship With Uncle Louis long gone and the villa in Amalfi sold, along with the memories of the boy Aldo, Mummy's life was severely circumscribed by the dictates of a jealous and domineering husband. Only in later years had Suzanne pieced together the fragments of disassociated memories that spelled out the pathetic decline of Faye Garbisian: the time that she found Mummy having drinks in her sitting room with the absurdly handsome young man who came every month to clean the windows; the night that Daddy sent a footman packing and she heard Mummy crying far into the night;

a score of incidents, trifling in themselves, that pointed to the urgent, constant yearnings of the lovely, lonely butterfly imprisoned within the web of an older, colder partner. Then there had been Mummy's first unaccountable disappearance.

Suzanne had learned the bald facts surrounding the disappearance from a scurrilous gossip column in a newspaper favored by the kitchen staff of the Garbisian establishment and occasionally scanned by her when no one was looking. She could recall it, almost word for word, as she had read it that day, with mounting horror and disbelieving protest.

> *Flash!* . . . why, we ask ourselves, is fey Mrs. Faye Garbisian, spouse of the world's seventh richest man, touring the Near East with a gentleman named Sid Arkwright? Can she be conducting a depth inquiry into one of her husband's many enterprises? (Fact—Aram Garbisian is major stockholder of Pillar & Vine Road Haulers, Ltd.) In which case the egregious Mrs. G. is applying herself very closely and diligently to the task, for Mr. Sid Arkwright, aged 25, is a driver for Pillar & Vine, and the couple are at present journeying to Istanbul, Turkey, in the driving cab of one of the company's trucks . . .

She remembered well the day of Mummy's return, how she had arrived back in the second best Rolls and looked as if she had been crying a lot. She had given her "little Suzu" a passionate hug and a Turkish doll in peasant costume. And the night of her return from the first of her many disappearances, Mummy had made the first of her many unsuccessful suicide attempts . . .

"I've never seen it so bad!" Ian Einskattle's murmured complaint intruded upon her thoughts. "See how the gullies are overflowing? And look at the loch—I wouldn't want to take a boat out there tonight."

Away on her left, through the fleeting belt of trees that separated the narrow road from the shore of the great loch, she could see the winking lights of the far bank and the sweep of dark, wave flecked, rain lashed waters that lay between.

She shuddered and retreated farther into the collar of her coat. "Is there really a monster in Loch Ness?" she murmured.

"Don't spare my feelings, for I think nothing could really alarm me any more after tonight's experience."

"The monster legend really began," he said, "when they built the new road on the far shore in the nineteen-thirties. One sighting led to another, and since then we've had over a thousand honest or gullible, simple or myopic folks who claim to have seen him. And no one around these parts is going to knock the Loch Ness Monster, Scotland's most potent, unpaid tourist attraction. Did my brother hurt you very much tonight, Suzanne?"

"It was the end of a beginning," she replied after a while. "And the beginning wasn't frightfully auspicious Ian, why did Jock resign his commission in the Guards?"

"I don't know."

"What's the present financial situation of the Einskattle estate?"

"I don't know. The best guy to tell you that would be Hemstock."

"What did Jock do at Oxford," she asked, "that nearly brought him into trouble with the law?"

No answer.

"You know, don't you?"

"Imperfectly. I wouldn't wish to speculate."

Pause. The rain, she thought, was like someone throwing buckets of water straight against the windshield; the busy wipers made no headway against it. Ian Einskattle was reduced to crawling speed along the narrow, rutted road.

"Tonight," she said, "I overheard a pair of Jock's friends—I suppose one would call them that—speculating about what they were pleased to call his 'old tricks' Do you know about your brother's old tricks, Ian?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about his old tricks."

Presently, he replied, "My brother takes pleasure in the pain of others, both mental and physical. What you saw tonight—that was Jock indulging in his old tricks in a comparatively civilized, all-pals-together sort of way. There are darker aspects of his proclivity. You must have guessed that at least Why did you marry him, Suzanne?"

"I fell in love with him; he captivated me," she replied. "In the hackneyed phrase, he swept me off my feet, and my feet have only just touched the ground again. And now they're running away as fast as they can go."

Ian braked suddenly, and the little car slewed to a sidelong halt in the muddy road. Ahead, a red light was swinging, and she saw a flashing blue light atop a car. Dark figures swarmed toward them.

"Road blocked ahead, sir Landslide. Ye'll ha' tae go back "

"No way through to Inverness, officer?" asked Ian.

"It'll take half a day, even when we've brought up the earth shifter, sir. Get you back—aye, an' warn anyone else ye may meet along the way."

"Thanks. Good night."

"Good night to ye."

"Damn!" swore Ian Einskattle, slamming the little car into reverse and spinning the wheel. "Damn, damn, damn! For ten years I've been promising myself to get out and now when I've finally brought myself to it—*this!*" The car's engine stalled as he tumbled the gears He bowed his head over the wheel and groaned.

"I, for one, am not going back to Einskattle," declared Suzanne.

"Nor I!" he responded.

"Then where?"

"There's Fort Augustus," he said "They'd put us up at the Inchnacardoch or the Lovat But it's a lousy road all the way, and we're as likely to run into another landslide beyond Einskattle as in this direction."

"Isn't there an inn somewhere between here and the castle?"

"By God, there is!" he exclaimed. "I've passed it once or twice but never set foot inside And it isn't far." He restarted the Mini with a flourish, and the little car set off gamely into the driving rain.

A mile down the road, Ian turned off to the left into what was scarcely more than a cart track, with drystone walls looming on each side and gnarled, bare tree branches clutching taloned fingers overhead. A dark world of emptiness in the rain drenched night And then a light ahead

The inn stood at one corner of a prim square that boasted a church, a chapel, a temperance hall, a general store and post office and a row of almshouses All were in darkness as Suzanne and Ian hefted their luggage out of the Mini and trudged, bowed against the drenching rain, through squelching mud to the front door of the hostelry, which, by a swinging sign, declared itself to be the Auchtery Arms

"Leave this to me," said Ian. "Highland innkeepers don't take kindly to being hauled out of bed in the small hours. Don't be startled by anything I say."

Crouching in the doorway, bowed against the rain, she watched him ring the bell. The shy, withdrawn younger Einskattle brother was showing more resolve and enterprise than many—including she—would have suspected him of.

A second ring brought a face to an upper window, and a sullen challenge. "What's this, then? D'ye no ken the time?"

"I want a couple o' rooms. The road's closed an' ma wife's four months gone wi' a babby. Would ye have her spend the night cooped up in the car?" Ian responded in the highland brogue, presumably so as not to be taken for a Sassenach and get a refusal.

A pause, and then, "All right. Bide a wee."

There came a clumping down the stairs, a dog's bark, the rattle of bolts. The innkeeper was in ankle-length nightgown under an overcoat. He gestured them inside.

"That'll be two-fifty apiece, wi' bed an' breakfast."

"Cheap at the price," said Ian.

"Mind ye wipe your feet."

They were both dripping wet from the short walk from the car to the door. The two rooms to which they were directed were adjacent and connected by a door. In one of them—it had a comfortable-looking double bed—a lively log fire blazed in a hearth. The innkeeper wished them a good night and departed.

"It's been a long night," said Suzanne. "And here's me, wedded for the second time—*and* with child."

He grinned. When he grinned, and only then, did he bear some resemblance to his older brother. "It was the only tale that would have got us into here at this hour," he said. "As to being an unmarried couple looking for accommodation in this neck of the woods—the puritan Highlands—you could be Old Nick himself and his girlfriend for all the hope you'd have. Well, we'd best get to bed. Tomorrow will be another long day. Good night, Suzanne."

"Good night, Ian."

He went into the next room, carrying his bags, and closed the door. Suzanne went to the adjacent bathroom, stripped to her skin, washed and cleaned her teeth and slipped into a nightdress. She was arranging her wet outer clothes about the

fire on chair backs when there came a tap on the connecting door and Ian entered at her call. He was in his dressing gown and carrying his wet clothes.

"Room for any more dirty washing?" he asked

"We can hang yours on coat hangers from the chimney-piece," she said.

"Good."

She took the garments from him, only marginally noting that he was eyeing her strangely She was unaware that her chiffon nightdress did not do much to conceal the body beneath.

"There we are," she said, stepping back from her handiwork. "They should be dry by morning, Ian "

"Well, good night again, Suzanne."

"Good night."

She presented her cheek for a brotherly kiss By some means, his lips moved mostly from cheek to lips It was clumsily, inexpertly done She struggled gently to withdraw from him as his hands stole, tumblingly, round her waist

"That was *not* a brotherly kiss," she said mildly "Shall we all go to bed and calm down?"

'Sorry, Suzanne " He looked like a little boy who had been caught stealing apples "I don't know what came over me "

She reached out and patted his cheek ' I think we both have a pretty good idea what came over you, dear," she said "Like me, you're probably rather tired and overwrought And I think you should go to bed Next door," she added pointedly

"Now you're treating me like a child," he said angrily "I'm not a queer, you know, no matter what my damned brother says."

"I never thought you were, Ian," she replied "And just now you quite convinced me."

Her declaration seemed to please him He really was very immature, she thought. And vulnerable To hurt him would be as inexcusable as whipping a puppy

"Well, good night," he said.

"Good night, Ian."

He left her, quietly closing the door Suzanne shook her head, smiling to herself The disparity between the two brothers was quite laughable as if Jock would have taken no for an answer and gone to sleep in the next room What was her husband doing now? Not that it called for much imagination The girl he took upstairs looked to have a flame that would not easily be quenched.

Did she care? . . .

She cared very much Having been captivated by Jock Einskattle in such a swift and breathtaking manner, she, essentially a one man woman and in principle chaste, was not easily going to come to terms with a severance of her marriage vows. She supposed it would end, now or later Surely the hideous degradation to which he had subjected her in the great hall of Einskattle was sufficient grounds of cruelty And she even feared one would not have to probe very far into Jock's life to uncover evidence of adultery.

All the same, it was a pity. A pity.

She turned out the bedside lamp but did not close her eyes. The fire's warm glow dimly illuminated the room Ian's trousers and jacket, hanging from the chimneypiece and silhouetted against the flames, looked like the looming shadow of a man. She suddenly recalled Cy Delamere, dark and tall in his white tie and tails, recalled her powerful attraction to him Thank God he had not been present to witness her degradation at the hands of her husband The thought of the incident being re counted to Nadia Nielsen . . .

She shuddered and closed her eyes. It was all too painful

In her dream, she was running through the labyrinthine corridors and staircases of a great house that was familiar to her, yet not familiar She was a child again, young and frightened. The urgency that informed her haste was no more than an instinct She had to arrive before it was too late And, after the perverse manner of dreams, the faster she ran, the slower was her progress, like wading through mud. She finally reached the upper floor of the house, where the danger lay.

Her struggle became even more agonizing the nearer she came to her goal, and her nostrils were assailed by a stench that caused her to gag and vomit Then she was pounding upon a door, wrenching at the handle, willing it to open When it did, she faced a wall of flame that engulfed her, tore at her hair, her eyes, its roaring fury drowning even her screams.

She woke up, still screaming, to see Ian Einskattle over by the fireplace, swiping at his burning clothes with a pillow The room was full of smoke A scream died on her lips, and an awful trembling began Her delicate frame shook uncontrollably.

When he had put out the flames, he flung open the window.The rushing night air quickly cleared the room of smoke

"Thank God you woke up." he said. "I heard your screams "

"I screamed in my sleep!" she cried

"Good for you," he said "We shouldn't have put the clothes so near to the fire. There's a hole in the seat of my pants. I shall have to walk with my back facing the wall through Inverness airport tomorrow Well, it could have been worse. Hope to heaven that the landlord didn't hear you or smell the smoke. Great scot, Suzanne, what's the *matter* with you? . . ."

She was sitting up in bed, hands pressed to her eyes, unable to control the shivers that threatened to rend her apart. Ian went to her quickly and took her in his arms She instantly responded by nestling against him and burying her face against his chest, finding sudden release in ungovernable tears

"Suzanne—what is it? What's come over you? The fire's out. It was nothing. Nothing!"

She was unconsolable.

There came a voice from the corridor outside, a knock upon the door.

"Are you all right? What's amiss wi' ye'"

"Nothing," replied Ian "My wife had a bad dream, that's all."

Suzanne whimpered against his shoulder, he pressed her head more closely to him to muffle the sound

'I heard her calling out," said the landlord, who sounded only half convinced Then, incongruously, "Will ye be needing coffee in the morning?"

"Yes, please," replied Ian.

"Good night."

"Good night."

Suzanne had not ceased her trembling When he tried to free himself from her grasp, she clung to him tighter. "Don't leave me," she pleaded "Stay with me Hold me. Talk to me. Say anything you like But don't leave me, and, most of all, don't let me go to sleep again tonight "

"Why? Why?" he asked.

"In case I dream the dream again," she said

"Dream—what dream?"

"The dream of fire."

"Tell me about it, Suzanne."

"I wish I could," she whispered "I think that if I could share the horror of it, it would go from me forever."

"But that's ridiculous, Suzanne It's only a dream."

Her haunted eyes came up to regard his eyes "For me, it

was once reality," she whispered. "I lived through it when I was a young girl. The smoke—it must have been the smell of the smoke that triggered the remembrance."

"You poor kid."

He pulled her more closely to him Ian, the immature and vulnerable, was now a tower of strength in her great need. Soundlessly, he laid her down, her head upon the pillow, and crept in between the sheets beside her.

Chapter 3

For the rest of that summer's night, they lay, breast to breast, thigh against thigh, she drawing comfort and sustenance from his hard warmth, he drinking in the mystery of her softness. She urged him to talk to her constantly and prompted him with fresh questions, new topics when he faltered for want of something to say.

She probed him about his career at Oxford and found it a rich vein, for it was a subject about which he had a lot to unburden.

"I'm no academic," he said. "I'm a pedagogue at heart I once had this old tutor who always held that Oxford was for the young and for the old A place to drink the cup of youth, and a place to end one's days in quiet and contemplation. In between those two ages, he said, a man must go out into the world and make a place for himself And that's what I most want to do To go out and teach kids "

She traced the line of his shoulder with a fingertip. The tears had dried on her cheeks, most of the terror had dissipated, all would be well, provided he kept her mind and interest occupied till morning The terror always died with the sun.

"Do you have any specific plans?" she asked

"There's this job in Malawi," he said "Assistant head of a boys' public school I've been short-listed on account of my academic record and family background mostly the latter, I suspect I don't kid myself that I shall survive the interview "

"Why not, Ian?"

He laughed shortly, bitterly "Well, I'm not exactly a selection board's ideal of a candidate, am I' My brother Jock could walk away with it. I shall probably either stammer or dry up."

"You sell yourself too short, Ian."

"I've had plenty of practice. Plenty of tuition from my dear brother. There's never been a time when I've been able to forget that I'm a cripple, a bloody faggot, . . ."

She put her small hand over his lips, silencing him. "No, no," she whispered. "You mustn't say, mustn't even think, those things. You are what you wish yourself to be, not what people outside of your mind determine that you should be."

He turned his head away from her. "Lying here with you, can't you imagine what I would wish to be to you?"

"You are a great comfort to me," she whispered. "Without you, tonight, I might have gone out of my mind."

"Not quite the same, is it?" he said bitterly. "What am I to you but a court jester? A safe proposition to be in bed with because you're scared of the dark and fire. Isn't that true?"

Suzanne could not bring herself to reply.

"Admit it—you have used me tonight! *Used me!*"

The hurt, the bitterness in his voice cut through her own fears with the clean, cauterizing blade of truth. She had, indeed, used him, prostituted his energies, his emotions, the pride of his manhood, to serve her own ends all that night.

She would repay—in kind . . .

Gently taking his hand, she guided it under the thin chiffon molding her bosom and laid it over her right breast. When she spoke, it was against his mouth, moistly.

"Does that feel nice, Ian? Kiss me. And again. And now kiss me here. That's beautiful."

Dawn came quite early: a chorus of starlings greeted the first thin light that drifted in through the window and tinted the ceiling above her head. Ian was asleep, his head pillowed on her breast, his breath warm against her bare skin. With daylight, she could let go of everything and join him. When she woke, the terror would be completely gone—till the next time something triggered off the memory that she had forced into her unconscious for many years.

As it happened, she did not sleep but lay in contented drowsiness. A while later, he stirred in her arms and opened his eyes.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello. Feeling better?" he asked.

She nodded. "And you?"

"I feel terrific. You must have guessed that you are the first woman I've had in my life."

She smiled and stroked his cheek. "I never would have guessed," she lied. Was it this, she wondered, that led Mummy into her frantic adventures with men younger than herself? This warm feeling of having reached out and touched someone's life with an experience they might never forget? A dangerous path, Suzanne. Let it never become a habit.

"We must go soon," she said. "I wonder if the road's open yet."

"It will be on the local eight-o'clock news," he said. "I've got my transistor in the other room. Suzanne, what are you going to do when you get to London?"

"Sit tight in Sloane Square and let a little time go by."

"Are you going to divorce Jock?"

"I don't know, Ian. I haven't thought that one through yet. And what about you — what shall you do?"

"Stay at my club. Wait for the summons to the interview for the Malawi job."

"You want that job very much, don't you?"

He nodded. "I happen to think the work that's waiting to be done in the Third World is important. We took so much, we the empire builders. Our great cities, vast buildings, country mansions, titles and honors — most were paid for by the Empire's colonies. In the century ahead, we've got to give something back in return, or we shall join them in being the losers."

"You are really a very, very nice man, Ian," she said. "And a considerable lover."

He laughed shortly and mumbled something she did not catch.

"What did you say?" she asked. "You think — what?"

"It was Greek," he replied. "I said, 'Would that I were.' I will write it with my fingertip on your body, Suzanne."

He drew back the sheet, baring her from the waist upward, and then slowly proceeded to write, with the tip of his forefinger, from her navel to the deep valley between her breasts.

"'Would that I were,'" he said. "Would that I were Jock, your husband and lover, and not myself. Have we done a very wicked thing together, Suzanne?"

"I think it's something approaching incest," she replied, adding with an attempt at lightness, "You mustn't let slip about us when you go for your interview for the Malawi job."

"Dear me, no. I shall be most circumspect," he responded

in a like vein. "I should tell you that the school is governed by an extremely strict and puritanical religious sect. If they ask me—though I doubt they will—if I have slept with my beautiful sister-in-law, the Countess of Einskattle, I shall swiftly introduce a fresh topic."

They both laughed.

More seriously, he went on. "If they knew, they wouldn't give me a job as school janitor, let alone assistant principal."

She took his hand. "Don't worry," she said. "It will be our secret for always."

"For always." He kissed her forehead.

There came the sound of footsteps up the passage outside. A knock at the door.

"Coffee, sir and madame." A girl's voice.

Their eyes met. Suzanne stared in sudden alarm as Ian crossed over to the door and opened it an inch. Thanking the girl, he tried to take the tray of coffee from her, but she brushed past him and carried it to the bedside table, where she laid it down with a deferential "good morning, ma'am" to the woman in the bed.

"Well!" said Suzanne when she had gone.

"I only hope," said Ian, "that she isn't a special investigator for the Board of the Lilongwe Public School for Boys!"

Again, they laughed. For Suzanne it was a release from the horrors, real and imaginary, of the previous night. For him who knew? The delight at a new fulfillment? They drank the quite excellent coffee, side by side upon the bed, for all the world like a pair of practiced lovers, entirely at their ease.

"The radio news!" remembered Suzanne.

He went to fetch the transistor. "The road will almost certainly be open by now," he said. "And there's a midday London flight out of Inverness."

He turned on the set.

". . . that was the district weather report and now follows this morning's news of the Highlands and Islands read by Sandy McLauchlan."

"Good morning. From Fort Augustus we have a report that the Earl of Einskattle has been gravely injured in a fall. . . ."

"Jock!" cried Suzanne, eyes flaring.

"Hush!" Ian laid a restraining hand on her arm.

". . . It appears that Lord Einskattle, who only last month was married to the former Miss Suzanne Garbisian, artist and heiress, fell from the battlements of his family seat, Castle

Einskattle, in the early hours of this morning. Lord Einskattle has been received into hospital at Fort Augustus, where his condition is said to give cause for much concern. Last night's torrential rain brought widespread flooding and landslides in—"

Ian snapped off the transistor.

"I've got to go to him!" she cried.

He nodded. "Of course."

They dressed, paid the bill and left immediately. The maid who had served them coffee happened to be picking up the tray and empty crockery as the car drove away from the inn yard and down the lane toward the great loch.

She watched it go from the bedroom window, frowning in puzzlement. She shook her head, and pondered

The intensive care unit was at the end of a long, pine-scented corridor of the hospital, and was like a remote corner of some purgatory. Even the notice on the door carried overtones of mortality:

Ring Once.
Relatives Only.
No Children.

The pale-faced little nurse who answered their ring carried the scent of disinfectant.

"Lady Einskattle, is it?" she asked in a rich brogue. "Will you come in?"

Jock Einskattle lay under a single sheet on a bed that seemed like an operating table. There were tubes stuck in and out of his every orifice. His eyes were partly open and glazed over. A thin trickle of saliva coursed out of his open mouth and ran down the day old stubble on his cheek. His head was bandaged, his right cheekbone swollen and greenish in color. His right leg and arm were both in plaster, while all the ribs of the same side stood out against the white skin in the same unearthly greenish hue flecked with the scarlet of broken veins.

"We're doing all we can for him," said the little nurse. "It's very hopeful. He responded as lively as you please about an hour ago. Will you say something to him, your ladyship?"

"Jock," whispered Suzanne. "Jock, can you hear me?"

There was no reply.

"How—how is he?" faltered Suzanne. It seemed such an inept question; Jock, Thirteenth Earl Einskattle, was demonstrably not well.

"There are some internal injuries," said the little nurse, "and he's due for a brain scan in the morning if he can be moved there. It's the head injuries, you see, as is causin' the concern."

Suzanne looked toward the little nurse, who was distracted by the arrival of a new patient "I think we'd better go, nurse," she said. "Unless there's anything we can do."

The girl seemed grateful. "Leave him with us, your ladyship," she replied. "He's going to be all right, that I promise you. And haven't I seen many the like?" She squeezed Suzanne's hand. "God bless you, your ladyship." She rushed to assist the lifting of the newcomer onto a bed.

After one last glance at Jock and another toward Ian, who looked scarcely more wholesome than his brother, she walked out. Outside waited the bailiff Hemstock, dressed in a tweed suit, twirling a tweed cap between his thick fingers.

"'Morning, y'ladyship," he said "I've just been speaking with the surgeon He's very hopeful, but we'll not really know the extent of the brain damage till he's been on the scanner and, till he recovers consciousness, whether or not the damage is likely to be permanent." Despite the very proper gravity of his manner, the man's dark eyes were probing at her body

"How—how did it happen?" she asked.

The bailiff shrugged "His lordship proposed one last game, a game of dare. When it came to his turn, Mr Tam Hagan dared him to walk on his hands along the walkway at the top of the battlements."

"Oh, my God!" Suzanne remembered it well, the unbalustraded balcony high above the courtyard.

"He'd have done it, too," said Hemstock, "or so I reckon, but for that last tumbler of whiskey he downed before he set off. Or, indeed, it may have been the whiskey that saved him. He fell like a rag doll, so he didn't break every bone in his body and get himself killed outright."

"Is there—anything I can do, Hemstock?" she asked

"No need for you to stop here at any rate, ma'am," he replied. "Having survived so far, he's in no immediate danger I'll remain here today and phone you at the castle if there's any change."

"Thank you," she said, grateful that she was not expected

to stay, because, for reasons that she could not bring herself to dwell upon, she had a horror of hospitals and hospital waiting rooms. "I shall no doubt see you later, Hemstock."

"Yes, m'lady." The man gave a nod that was almost a bow.

Ian Einskattle drove her back to the castle. They went in silence most of the way, and in the little car there was the unmistakable overtone of failure and despair that she, at least, should be retracing her steps so soon. They parted company in the courtyard. He took her hand.

"We'll meet again, Suzanne," he said.

"Of course."

"No regrets?"

"No regrets, Ian. Why should there be regrets? We did no harm to ourselves, or to anyone, by what we did together. It's our secret — and so it will remain. Good luck with your interview."

They exchanged chaste kisses and he was gone.

Alice came running to greet her, took her suitcase and wept from relief and release. She had been witness to Jock's horrendous fall, as indeed had everyone in the castle — guests, servants and tenants. Where had her darling spent the night? she asked Suzanne. And how could she think of going off without her devoted Alice? And would she promise before God never to do the like again?

What's more, added the maid, Mr. Garbisian had been trying to get her on the phone all morning, having heard the news on the radio, and was threatening to fly up to Scotland today.

She rang Daddy, filled him in on some of the less sensational details of her husband's accident and assured him that there was nothing that his power and influence could do in the way of restoring Jock to health, neither by flying him out to the most brilliant brain surgeon on the West Coast of the United States nor by bringing the man over here. And she also dissuaded her parent from dropping everything and coming up to support her. Clearly, the tycoon set great store in his only child's having married into the British aristocracy. Perhaps he had nightmares of the bond being severed by death. Suzanne wondered how her father would react — always supposing that Jock recovered — to a separation or divorce? Badly, she supposed. As always, it was difficult to determine where his interest in her happiness ended and the appreciation of her

usefulness in various areas began. It was clearly more important for him to get her voted chairman of the Durable Assets Holding Company than to watch her receive academic honours at the Royal College How long would he expect her to endure an impossible marriage in order to use her aristocratic connections and title as a touchstone in the world of high finance and government patronage?

Bailiff Hemstock rang her in the afternoon. The news was all hopeful. The verdict of the neurosurgeon: the scanner showed nothing irreparable, but it was still early. Some residual physical difficulties were likely, but time and therapy would greatly reduce any hemiparesis, which, he explained, was paralysis down one side of the body of the sort suffered in a stroke There was no word of the brain damage having any effect upon the patient's sanity, nor did Suzanne dare to pose the question She thanked Hemstock and rang off.

Ian telephoned her that evening for news. He lingered on the phone, as if reluctant to cut the bond between them Suzanne had, by then, begun to regret that, out of gratitude, she had given herself to her brother-in-law in defiance of her marriage vow Jock mounting the stairs with a wanton in his arms was a vastly different image from the pathetic, vulnerable creature she had seen laid out in the intensive care unit with tubes in and out of him. Her feelings for Ian were unchanged, however: part sisterly, part maternal, in spite of the fact that he had been her lover for a night. She eased herself away from a protracted conversation, and from his veiled suggestion that they meet again some time when she was next in London She wished him well at his forthcoming interview and rang off.

"And as far as I'm concerned," she said to herself, "there'll be no further emotional entanglement with poor, dear Ian I have quite enough on my hands with Jock!"

Events were to underscore her resolve with the heavy hand of irony.

She visited her husband after he was shifted out of the intensive care unit and into a private room. Very weak and only half conscious, he was still being fed intravenously. He was being given simple leg and arm exercises by a stout, motherly physiotherapist who handled his fine, nude body as if he were a babe. In the first week, Suzanne was able to observe him emerging from a trancelike state to a higher stage where

he showed some response to stimulus. In the second week, he uttered a few disjointed words and clasped her hand in a vise-like grip of such intensity that the nurses had to fight him free.

A few days after that, Hemstock phoned from the hospital to say that he had fresh news and could he come to see her that afternoon? He implied urgency, and Suzanne asked him to call at around three. She greeted him in her private sitting room, which lay off the great hall. It was a pleasant, sunny chamber with granite walls softened by portraits of long-gone Einskattles, mostly of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some imp of caution had prompted her to have Alice present at the meeting, the maid was quietly sewing in the window seat when Hemstock was shown in.

Suzanne smiled at him and held out her hand. "I can't thank you enough," she said, "for all your help and attention to Lord Einskattle while he's been in hospital." It was a cool, slightly dismissive opening gambit that she had carefully rehearsed in her mind during luncheon and was intended to put him in his place.

He did not respond, but the dark, angry eyes panned over her shoulder in Alice's direction.

"Your pardon, ma'am," he growled, "but I should like to speak with you privately, if that's possible."

Suddenly at a loss, Suzanne turned to her maid. "Would you leave us, please, Alice?" she said. The woman gathered up her knitting basket and left, with a warning eye cocked toward the bailiff, a glance that he did not return.

"Will you sit down?" Suzanne gestured her caller toward an armchair facing the sofa that she occupied.

"Thank you, m'lady," he murmured—and calmly seated himself beside her on the sofa.

The proximity—his right hand rested upon the upholstered satin less than a handsbreadth from the curve of her upper thigh—unnerved her, but the essential calmness induced by a privileged upbringing came to her aid. "Would you like some tea?" she asked.

"Not for me, thanks," he replied. And smiled, dark eyes narrowing at her. "But I wouldn't say no to a dram."

"You'll find a whiskey decanter on the table over there," she said faintly.

He rose and went over. He filled a cut glass tumbler with the fine malt of the Einskattles and raised the vessel in a salute that was more than half mockery.

"Chin-chin, ma'am," he said.

"Your very good health, Hemstock," she replied, pulling down the hem of her skirt an additional half-inch past her knees. "Did you say that you had news for me? Your news concerns my husband's condition, I take it?"

To her astonishment, he winked and tapped the side of his nose with a fingertip He then replenished his tumbler to the brim and brought it back to the sofa, where he resumed his place—a mite closer to her than before Suzanne covertly measured her distance to the door and, as an alternative, to the bell rope that would summon a footman within a minute

Hemstock took another deep draft of the malt and said, "Now, your hubby Jock—he's always Jock when we're out on the grouse moors, y'know, and I'm Jamie to him. Jock an' Jamie, a fine pair o' knockabout comedians we make together out on the moors I can tell you, and many's the time we've sat up till dawn drinking and yarning in some inn on a mountainside. I well remember the time —"

"Hemstock," she interposed, "how is he—how *is* my husband?"

"Right as rain, ma'am," replied the other, leering at her over the rim of his glass, a vulpine leer that showed a set of remarkably fine and very white teeth. "When I last saw him a bare hour ago, he was sitting up for a wee while He says to me, he says, 'Damn your eyes, Hemstock, you dog'—that's how he addresses me when not in polite company, ma'am, and frequently when we are 'Damn you, Hemstock, you dog, where's that pretty wife o' mine, hey? I tell you, Hemstock, I've a mind to tup her, for I'm as randy as a stud bull!'"

Suzanne rose with pale dignity, crossed to the bell rope and pulled it. "So kind of you to bring me the good news personally, Hemstock," she said. "I'll have someone show you out."

Her manner, her tone, the implications of her action appeared not to dismay him in the slightest. He sat down in the sofa, crossed his tweed-clad legs, looked across the room with his head on one side, appraisingly, at a row of portraits hanging there.

"Now, don't you think that the eighth earl –he's the feller in the blue coat with all the gold braid and lace—greatly resembles our Jock, ma'am? A right feller he was, too Liked his dram and his women."

"Very interesting," said Suzanne flatly "May I take your empty glass?"

He ignored her outstretched hand. "The one next to him is his lady wife, formerly an actress from Drury Lane Theater They say she was tupped by everything in sight, and that, in emulation of the Roman Empress Messalina, she took on a company of whores from the stews of Inverness in a competition to see who could wear out the most gallants from dusk till dawn The contest was held in the great hall of this very castle, with the eighth earl and his cronies looking on, drinking and laying wagers. And the countess won How about that?"

Suzanne turned her back on him, closed her eyes and willed for the footman's footsteps to sound on the flagstones outside. Meanwhile, short of fleeing from his abominable presence or demeaning herself by bawling at him to shut his filthy mouth, she must endure the by now quite drunk bailiff. But, oh, she told herself, when Jock is back home, and if I decide to stay with him and make a go of our marriage despite all, I'll have that man dismissed It will be him or me

"Yes, a great lass was the eighth earl's countess," drawled the voice behind her. "'Tis on record that she never refused a man."

Footsteps outside the door. A discreet knock

"Come in," said Suzanne, relieved

"Though there's no record of her being tupped by her own husband's brother and that in the bedroom of a common inn!"

The nightmare words were at first just words. She was beginning to assemble them into shape, rounding them out in form and meaning, when she realized that she was staring vacantly at the liveried young footman who had come in; and that the lad was staring back at her in puzzlement and some embarrassment.

"Your ladyship," he repeated, "you called?"

"Yes—I . . ."

"Ma'am?"

She sought desperately. "The—er—whiskey decanter seems to be nearly empty. Would you fill it up again, please?"

The footman crossed to a corner cupboard, where, from a well-stocked supply of bottles, he took out one and carefully poured the pale amber contents into the decanter Suzanne watched him, her back to the man lolling on her sofa, her mind fighting within itself for answers, for questions .

Numbly, she watched the servant bow to her and take his

leave, wishing she could depart with him, do anything but still be in that room alone with Hemstock.

"And now, m'lady," drawled the hated voice, "you can pour me another dram with your own fair hands. And no short measure, mind."

Avoiding his eyes, she obediently took the proffered tumbler and made a show of filling it. But there was no missing his lustful, triumphant stare when she turned again.

"Pour one for yourself," he said.

"I don't drink in the after—"

"Pour one for you!" It was an order. Her hands trembled as she obeyed.

"Now come and sit down here beside me. That's fine. Comfortable?"

He saw her nervousness, and the way that the tumbler, held primly on her knee with both hands, was nearly spilling its contents He sat back and regarded her

"In answer to your unspoken question," he said, "the lass who brought your coffee that morning at the Auchtery Arms is my niece." He waited for her start of shock, then continued "Oh, it was well thought out, I grant you that. A third-rate village inn well off the beaten track and away from Einskattle country. Run by the sort of folk who've never owned a TV, seldom read a newspaper and whose idea of a holiday is a day's jaunt to Inverness and back by bus. But for our Jessie, you two would have got away with it—she's seen you and young Einskattle from afar when she's been over to my place " He reached out and squeezed her shoulder, his hand lingering on the soft flesh. "Don't look so miserable, duckie. What does it matter, so long as you had a good time? *Did* you have a good time? I wouldn't have thought the likes of you would have found young Master Ian up to much."

She blazed at him, "It wasn't planned the way your filthy mind sees it. We were—we were stormbound." Her voice tailed away. Oh, why, she thought, am I excusing myself and at the same time condemning myself to this leering swine? "What are you going to do about it?" she asked

He took a pull at the whiskey and winked at her. "Now, what *should* I do about it?" he asked with an air of innocence. "Tell his lordship that his lady wife had a dirty night with his brother? As a devoted servant of the Einskattles, that would be my duty. Yes, I think that's what I must do."

"No-o-o-o!" she breathed.

He looked cunning. "Ah, I fancy you've a pretty good idea how old Jock would react to that He'd take a horsewhip to you for that, m'lady And, as your adultery can be proved, you could never sue him for divorce And then there's his young brother. You wouldn't think a man could so hate and detest his own close kin, would you? I tell you what he'd do to young Master Ian after he'd beaten him half to death, he'd make it known to the world that his brother had lain with his wife He'd not give a damn about being called a cuckold, for he's cuckolded scores himself And he'd have the satisfaction of knowing that his brother would never be able to show his face in the Highlands again, for the folk in these parts are staunch, God-fearing hypocrites They don't give a damn about adultery, cuckoldry, incest or what have you, provided it's all done with decent discretion, but when it's shouted from the rooftops and plastered all over the newspapers, it brings out all their righteous, Calvinist indignation Do you follow me?"

She met his eyes. "Please, no," she whispered "I'll pay you anything My father's rich You can have enough to go away from here and start up on your own Surely, the way my husband treats you, you can't enjoy working for him"

He gave his vulpine grin "What a kind lady," he murmured "Shall I make a deal? Truth to tell, I'm not a man who's ever lusted for money I take delight in *the simple things*"

Then—and she had been half expecting it—his fingers stole to the neck of the shirtwaist she wore Slowly, with infinite deliberateness, watching her all the time for her reactions, he unbuttoned her from neck to waist.

Suzanne did not flinch, but matched his gaze with head held high, contempt and loathing written plainly upon her face for him to see Her dignity served her nothing. Hemstock, never pausing in his slow task, drew the shirt from her shoulders

"You'll call round at my cottage tonight," he said "Make it eight o'clock, and dress yourself up nicely, inside and out, for it'll pay you to please me and to still my wagging tongue And now, before I have a last dram and go on my way, let's whet the appetite with a look at the goods that are being offered . . "

Immediately after Hemstock left she surprised Alice by summoning her and demanding a bath at least two hours ahead of her normal routine. Nor did she want the maid's attentions,

but ordered her out of the bathroom in a tight, taut voice. The older woman realized her mistress was very upset.

Alone, she showered first before stepping into the perfumed waters of her bath, covering every inch of her defiled skin. She wiped clean the breast where his teeth had briefly met, the navel where his whiskey-reeking tongue had licked; and all the rest of her.

Trapped!

She was trapped in a snare of her own devising. Fear, and then pity, had brought her to bed with her husband's brother, and now she was doomed to pay for her mistake. That she could allow Hemstock to betray her secret was quite out of the question. He had spoken of the physical pain and degradation that Jock would visit upon her if he found out, but that weighed very little in her reckoning. As to the disgracing of poor Ian, a woman who would give herself to one man in order to protect the good name of another man whom she did not even love was a fool. But she had gone along with both concepts, hoping to God that Hemstock—a cunning devil, but a man for all that, with a man's ignorance of the working of a woman's heart—would not divine her true Achilles' heel.

Daddy . . .

She was bound to him by ties stronger even than blood: by the knowledge of the horrors he had witnessed and suffered on the high mountain pass in Anatolia all those years ago, by the suffering that he must have known during his stormy, tragic years with Mummy. Compassion was what bound her to him. That—and fear. For she feared Aram Garbisian more than death and almost as much as fire.

Should that animal Hemstock shout it abroad that she had committed adultery with her husband's brother, and should Aram Garbisian read the sordid details of her brief adventure in the gutter press, Suzanne feared it would be the end of her father's hopes and dreams. She would flee to the ends of the earth rather than face her father's fury; that much did she fear him.

And so, drying herself after her bath, she told herself that it was partly to save her own skin, and partly to protect Ian, but mostly because of the tortuous ties that bound her to her father that she was going to keep the appalling tryst with Hemstock that night at eight.

She thought of Jock and supposed she should visit him. Picking up the dressing room phone, she asked the castle ex-

change to connect her with the hospital. The sister in charge answered on the private room extension

"This is Lady Einskattle How is my husband?"

"Much better, your ladyship."

"I'm so glad." God, what a banality! "When can I see him?"

"Well, your ladyship, he's sleeping now, and it's not to be wondered at, the way the lovely feller's been carrying on with my nurses, begging your pardon, your ladyship " The woman sounded in high, indulgent good humor. "He's had us all in tucks the afternoon through, with his cheeky ways and his risky talk. His lordship's brought a breath of fresh air into the place and no mistake. Would you call and see him some time in the morning, my lady?"

"Yes, I'll do that," replied Suzanne, lowering the phone and meeting her image reflected in the dressing room mirror She saw, as if for the first time, the Suzanne Einskattle née Garbisian who, so the gossip columns and common knowledge declared, was one of the beauties of her day. She who had never given the idea more than a passing thought, save the serene acceptance of a blessing that the gods or the fairies had bestowed upon her at birth something to be prized, not to make one puffed up with conceit.

And now this beauty was delivering herself to the appalling Hemstock in return for a promise of silence that was as counterfeit a coin as his fealty to the Einskattles And she, defenseless through her own folly, was to be no more than a slave to whatever he demanded of her A plaything

She thought of the plight of her father's family, remembered how her grandparents had smeared the girls' faces with mud and ash from the campfires to disguise their daughters' youthful loveliness from the predatory scrutiny of the *bashi-bazouks* Suzanne wished now to do the same to herself, to disguise the sweet curve of her cheek, the subtle planes of her bosom and belly —if only she had had the means.

"Oh, God, make me ugly tonight!" she cried out aloud in her anguish.

Hemstock's cottage, as she knew, lay a mile or so off the Inverness road, within sight of the towers and battlements of the castle.

She had dined alone, watched by the worried eye of Alice but entirely unaware of it, so sunk was she in her own thoughts After dinner, throwing an Arran cardigan over her short dinner

frock ("Dress yourself up nicely, inside and out" had been the injunction that she had not dared to ignore, down to the black underwear), she drove her Mini out of the mews, over the drawbridge and into the falling, autumnal dusk

The bailiff's cottage was a substantial, Highland-granite building dating from the fourteenth century, the home of the robber-baron Einskattles before they were received into the Scottish nobility Better than a cottage, it would have shamed many an English squire's manor house. After parking in the gathering shadows of a bay tree, Suzanne sounded the heavy bronze knocker of the door.

"Come in!" came the response.

She entered. Hemstock was on the telephone, seated, cross-legged, at an inglenook fireplace in the entrance hall, the receiver cradled in the crook of his arm. The dark eyes panned over Suzanne and burned bright with satisfaction.

"How many guns do you have in mind for Thursday, Sir John?" he said into the phone.

"We can handle sixteen, sir What time do you propose to begin?" He beckoned to Suzanne to approach him, his eyes never left her, and they were the eyes of a glutton regarding a ladened table.

The phone squawked on Placing a large, black-pelted hand over the mouthpiece of the instrument, he murmured to her, "Take off your dress."

Suzanne looked at him disbelievingly and looked about her for somewhere to hide if, indeed, she was obliged to carry out his command. There was not so much as a screen to retire behind. He mouthed to her to comply, reaching out to grab at her. She backed away, took off the Arran cardigan, slipped down the shoulder straps of her dress and let the sheer material whisper to her feet She was wearing little underneath, and that mostly black lace.

"I'll have the beaters in place at seven o'clock, Sir John," said her tormentor, brusquely gesturing to her to come close to him She was slow and reluctant to obey, and he seized her roughly by the wrist and dragged her the last stumbling step. He pulled her close to him, thigh to thigh, his free hand encircling her bare waist, his brutal mouth doing unspeakable, moist things with her soft neck, her ears.

"News of his lordship, Sir John?" The hand was now attacking the fastening of her bra. "All good news. He's sitting up and taking nourishment and leading the nurses in a high old

dance, they tell me. Ha ha – how right you are, sir. Takes more than a bump on the head to keep an Einskattle down. What was that you said, sir?"

And then his hands were directing hers to the waistband of the kilt he was wearing and the heavy leather buckle that cinched it about his muscular waist. He was wearing no shirt. Grudgingly, urged on by his impatient fingers, she divested him of the kilt. True to tradition, he was nude underneath.

The voice at the other end of the line droned and crackled on, unregarded, as Hemstock drew her to a shameful, carnal closeness and forced his mouth against hers. Suzanne cried out in pain and shock when he took her. She closed her eyes, clenched her teeth and willed herself to depart in spirit from her shame. The voice at the other end of the line seemed, to her, to compound the affront. To be taken so savagely in such an impersonal, detached way was almost more than she could bear.

At all costs, she told herself, she must remain calm and gathered in. In that lay her only chance of emerging spiritually intact from her ordeal. Paying no heed to the things he was doing to her with his lips, his free hand, his questing loins, she tried to shut out the sound of his breathing, although his slack, moist mouth, when it was not seeking hers, was close by her ear.

But now his sounds were filling the whole void of her surroundings, doubly loud, twice as abandoned. It was then she knew, to her utter shame, that her own labored breath had joined with his; that, like he, she was mounting to heights unimaginable.

Presently the phone went dead.

Her world was bounded by a timbered ceiling that stretched as far as her eyes could swivel. More scope than that and she would have to turn her head, and doing so might waken the sleeping beast by her side.

She had not slept after the excesses to which he had so brutally, so uncaringly, subjected her to. She did not even know the time, but supposed it must be past midnight, nor could she raise her left arm to look at her watch in the flickering firelight. His left arm, imprisoning her waist and arm, was closed about her left breast, his right tightly enclosing her hips.

She was numb with the shame at having been immediately aroused by his brutish maleness. Had he left it there, with her

curiously satiated and less ill-inclined toward him, she might have become the willing recipient of his importunities, now and later. Instead, beastlike, he had proceeded to subject her to excesses that her former lovers had spared her, that even Jock Einskattle—another brute, but of a more subtle, complex sort—had not more than hinted at.

Just inside the range of her vision, perched on high upon a spindly tripod like some visitation from outer space, was a Polaroid camera with a flash attachment. From time to time during their extravagances, Hemstock had left her to attend to the contraption. The nightmare of excesses to which he had exposed her had, she now remembered, been punctuated by the blinding flashes of magnesium lamps So her shame, bitterly implanted in her mind, had not gone unrecorded . .

They were sprawled across a divan bed in a low-ceilinged room on the upper floor, where, after his grotesque taking of her to the accompaniment of a telephone call, he had carried her, nude, in his arms. The heady scent of honeysuckle drifted in through the open window. In the distance, over the mountains to the north of the great loch, summer lightning was playing on the barren peaks, she could just discern the flickering of brightness being reflected onto the ceiling and hear the steady rumble of distant thunder. Remembering that, as a girl, she had been told that every second's pause between the flash and the roll of sound meant a mile, she addressed herself to counting.

Flash—one, two, three, four, five . . .

"Are you praying?" came his voice close by her ear.

She drew her breath sharply. "Praying?"

"Your lips are moving."

"I was counting."

"Counting your blessings, perhaps." There was a note of unbearable smugness in his voice. "I took you seven times, not counting the little improvisations."

She closed her eyes at the agony of remembering some of "the little improvisations." "You must hate me," she said. "Or you must hate the Einskattles, to have treated me so "

He raised himself up on one elbow, releasing his hold on her. Suzanne took the opportunity to draw the coverlet of the divan over most of her nudity. He lit himself a cigarette, drawing deeply upon the smoke, blowing it out luxuriously.

"I hate you all," he declared. "And with cause. They made my mother a whore, a plaything of the late lord's highborn

guests. Your husband didn't jest when he said that the roseate charms of Mrs Hemstock were greatly in demand among the hunting, shooting and fishing guests Indeed, I think it highly likely that I was sired by other than her husband – perhaps even by the twelfth earl himself, who must certainly have known my mother many times."

"I'm sorry," she said, conscious of the inadequacy, conscious that something, nevertheless, needed to be said.

"Her husband Hemstock, the gamekeeper, was a religious man," he said "And it's likely that, as a chapel-goer and lifelong celibate outside his marriage bed, he had no inkling, for years, of what was going on All that was changed in a day. I remember it well I was eleven at the time. Coming home from school in the village, I saw the police cars about this place and folk coming and going. My mother had the face of death. 'Something's happened to dad,' she told me, and I had it all in the end they had found him up in the orchard yonder, under a peach tree, with his chest shot clean through and his gun still clenched in his hands "

"Oh, my God!" breathed Suzanne.

"I don't know, can only guess, at what he saw that afternoon that drove him to it," said Hemstock "It's certain that his lordship called that afternoon and, finding only my mother at home, took tea with her Tea with her . " His voice tailed away.

"I'm sorry," said Suzanne "Believe me, I'm sorry "

"After that," said Hemstock, "my life took an upward turn No more village school with the snotty nosed brats of the Ein skattle estate Oh, no—it was a muddling exclusive private boarding school for Jamie Hemstock, for his lordship was de termined that the boy would go far You may pleasure yourself with another man's wife and drive him to suicide, but this can be offset by educating his boy to be a gentleman In the best circles this is known as charity I thank God that I don't harbor any charitable thoughts toward you, Lady Einskattle Only the most basic sort of lust.

"And now, if you'll be so good as to unwrap that stunning body of yours . . "

The last, the ultimate degradation to which he subjected her was like being led down into a fiery pit of hell, and there was no way in which she could stand apart and project herself

outside the experience. She felt alone and frightened; abandoned in a trough of vileness, with devils all about her, and only the perverted humanity of her torturer to hold on to as a defense against insanity.

Every so often, the torment remitted for a few moments. That was when the flashbulb blazed through the surrounding darkness and he unstraddled himself from her and went to reset the camera.

Finally, toward dawn, when the lightning had ceased to play and the eastern sides of the hills were tinged with pinkness, he intimated that he had had enough of her. He bundled her off the divan, threw her clothes in a heap at her feet and told her to go home. He would let her know, he added, when he would require her services again.

Suzanne drove back to the castle in the early light and slid the Mini into the mews garage unseen. She entered by the kitchen door, dodged the staff who were making early preparations for the day and reached her room unobserved by anyone

Except Alice but the maid did not challenge her mistress over her overnight absence; instead, she listened at the door to hear Suzanne run a hot bath and remain in it till midmorning. When she appeared in a neat two-piece suit, her eyes and a very large area of her unnaturally pale face shrouded behind an oversized pair of sunglasses, she nodded briefly to her maid and said she was going to visit her husband

The might of the Einskattles was demonstrated by the plethora of flowers—a whole florist's shop—that had been sent from all over the Highlands and beyond. They filled the room where Jock lay and the hallway approaching it.

He was sitting up in bed: head bandaged, cheeky-eyed, grinning, his eyes burning with a strange, wild brightness In response to her cool peck on the cheek, he grabbed at her, kissed her passionately on the mouth, mussed her blouse and would undoubtedly have dragged her into bed with him had not the surgeon, a distinguished neurologist, arrived with his entourage of acolytes.

While Suzanne listened to the doctor, Jock Einskattle smoldered in a mounting resentment. The great man was outlining the earl's case history and prognosis to the collection of newly graduated doctors who formed his team The cause of the accident, he informed them, had been drunken folly. The out-

come, due to the relaxed manner of the fall, had been providentially slight: a broken humerus and femur, a small rupture of the liver that was already mending satisfactorily and the classic hemiparesis that was now almost negligible

"There is, however, a residual manic tendency, an inclination to aggressive behavior, which is symptomatic and may give cause for concern," he added

"You mean I've become a bloody nut case?" interposed Jock Einskattle.

The great surgeon did not respond to the challenge.

"You"— he pointed to one of his acolytes, an intense woman who was staring at her mentor with naked adoration —"will examine the patient's pupils and tell me what you see "

"Yes, Sir Hugh."

The little acolyte produced a magnifying device with a light attached, which she placed close to Jock Einskattle's left eye, bending low over him as she did so From the left, she shifted to the right and back again, punctuating her movements with short squeals of alarm.

"What do you see, young woman?" demanded the great man

"I see nothing, Sir Hugh," bleated the poor girl, face scarlet with embarrassment. ' Every time I get close to him, the patient squeezes my breasts."

There was more to it than an exaggerated form of his normally shocking behavior. Jock, as Suzanne discovered after ten minutes with him following the surgeon's departure, betrayed a waywardness, a zany, cross-grained perversity of thought and action that was totally unlike the man she knew. He was Jock Einskattle whole hog, yet with the added quality of charmlessness. For a man whose great stock in trade, the consolation for his frightful behavior, had been his winsome, rather boyish charm, the change was alarming

"I'm pulling out of this dump at the end of the week," he announced "And I want you to have my suite at the castle fixed up to accommodate a nurse Better make it a couple of nurses." He pointed an authoritative finger at her. "*Pretty* nurses, mind, not like the old bats they supply me with in here " His scowl turned, like the switching on of a light, into a zany, slack-mouthed grin "But you know my taste in women flesh, Suze, dear Let one of 'em be a brunette rather like you, and

t'other a blonde. That's right, a blonde—rather like that stewardess we had on the amphibian to Venice. What was her name, Suze?"

"Tricia," said Suzanne flatly.

"Tricia—that's it! By God, one helluva time I had with her in Venice!"

Suzanne did not reply at once She deliberately waited till a sparrow on the branch of a yew tree outside the window, having alighted and preened its tiny wings and tail, flew off before she said, "Did Tricia stay behind in Venice, Jock?"

He frowned, as when a schoolmaster is obliged to repeat an oft-repeated principle to a particularly thick-headed pupil. "Of *course* she stayed behind in Venice Haven't I told you a dozen times? I got her off of the plane and set her up in this hotel near the Piazza San Marco It may have been the Danielli, I don't remember." His hand went to his temples and his brilliant blue eyes clouded. "There seems an awful lot that I don't remember nowadays But I do remember that I had one helluva time with that Tricia." Again the zany grin.

"If you were having such a good time, why did we have to leave in such a hurry, Jock?" she asked quietly.

The grin was washed away, and in its place flashed a narrow eyed glance of malevolent cunning His right hand snapped out and took Suzanne's wrist, dragging her close to him.

"You know damn well why we had to leave Venice!" he shouted "Why are you playing the innocent with me, woman?"

"Jock, you're hurting me," she whispered

He thrust her from him. "You're all the same when it comes down to it," he said. "Two faced Promise more than you produce That Tricia bird, she was just the same. But, oh, the high old time we had, she and I, that night on the amphibian " He rubbed his hands in a sort of miserly glee, like a man turning over his storehouse of memories. "Heh! While you were lying in your chaste marriage bed, the blonde stewardess chick and I were having it off in the shower next door, would you believe?"

Suzanne stole a glance at her watch How much longer, she thought, before she could make some reasonable excuse to leave him, to get away from his black confessional? She already felt physically sick.

He shook his head, bearlike, scowling "But, in the end, she promised more than she could produce. And there was this

night when she came over all pious, when her lower middle-class scruples started to show through the phony veneer. So I knocked her around a little and she raised the whole hotel. The cops were called. It was discreetly suggested that my departure from the shores of dear old Italia would not be unappreciated. As you will recall."·

So that was it! They had been thrown out of the country after all. And because Jock had "been up to his old tricks" again.

She walked over to the window and looked out over the landscape of hill and heather, with the glint of the loch beyond gray rooftops. It provided her with a pause to collect herself, an opportunity to turn her back to the man in the bed.

"I'll arrange for two nurses to be brought in, Jock," she said at length. "One brunette, one blonde, like you said."

"That's my girl," said Einskattle. "Spare no expense. Nothing but the best. That's what your old man said to me. He was on the phone to me this morning."

"Daddy phoned you?" She turned to regard him again.

"That's right. 'My dear Jock,' he says—sorry I can't get the wog accent. 'My dear Jock, spare no expense as regards medical fees. I will underwrite everything.' Isn't that nice? Some father-in law, eh? And what's more, when I'm on my feet again, he wants me to accept directorships in several of his companies. Not that I've any illusions as to why. The old Einskattle handle on the letterheads will probably be worth double the fees I shall be receiving. But it's all money for old rope. I don't have to do anything, you see."

The horrible truth revealed itself to her. Daddy was tying her inextricably to the Einskattle title, and to a marriage which, having gone so badly, could not but go even worse in the future. She envisioned a constant succession of Tricias, more rounds of 'Jock's old tricks,' with the police being squared and things being hushed up, like they had been at Oxford.

"So what about it?" he said. And she realized that he had been addressing her.

"What about *what*, Jock?" she asked, bemused.

He leered. "Do I have to spell it out? Don't worry your pretty head about anyone coming in—not that it would matter—because they're all too scared of me to come near unless I call 'em. Come on, sweetie. I've been in this damn place so long that I'm like a stag in rut." He reached out and, taking

her wrist, pulled her onto the bed, wrenching at her skirt, her underwear.

She had a notion to resist him, but instead, she submitted to his frenzied rutting His attentions did not arouse a spark of response in her naturally warm and complaisant nature. Instead, her mind went back to another time, another place; the night of her honeymoon, and she lying alone while a few feet away from her, beyond a sliver of plastic paneling, her bridegroom of half a day and half a night was enjoying a strange blonde in the shower cabinet; and, surely, but for the sound of the engines she would have overheard them . . .

"Aaaaaah!"

She cried out when he struck her across the mouth with the heel of his hand, sending her reeling across the bed, with the salty tang of blood in her mouth.

"You're all the same!" he snarled "All the bloody same! Promise more than you can produce. What was *that* performance supposed to represent? God, an inflatable party doll would show more animation Get out of my sight!"

He began to throw things at her. a tumbler, which struck her on the cheekbone, raising a weal, a box of cigars, some flowers, anything he could lay his hands upon Suzanne, picking up her handbag, her scattered clothes, the bits and pieces of her shattered self-respect, made a hasty retreat Something large and heavy slammed against the inside of the door an instant after she closed it behind her.

In the corridor, she had time to straighten her clothing and run a hasty comb through her hair before the sister-in-charge glided into view like a ship under full sail. The sister had obviously heard the racket and come to see what mayhem had been done At the sight of Suzanne, she showed admirable restraint, for it was obvious that Suzanne — lipstick smudged, a contusion on her cheekbone and a thin trickle of blood seeping from her mouth — had been on the receiving end of the racket

"Has the patient been troublesome, your ladyship?" she asked blandly. "Well, now, 'tis just his way, and him with that awful injury. You mustn't upset yourself."

"He says," said Suzanne, through swollen lips, "that he's coming home at the end of the week."

"Does he now ?" The sister did not look too displeased with this item of information. "Well, there's nothing we can do to prevent his lordship if he so chooses." On second thought, she

looked distinctly pleased "Would you be liking a cup o' tea, your ladyship?"

"No, thank you."

There came a bellow from beyond the door. "Nurse! Nurse! Where's the bloody nurse?"

"He'll be wanting the whiskey," said the sister "He demands it every morning."

"Where's that cow of a sister?"

The woman mentioned gave a shrug and laid her hand on the door latch. Clearly, the guardian angels of the thirteenth earl were in for a tough day.

Alice was waiting for her return and greeted her in the hall The maid cried out in anguish to see the wound on her cheek, the swollen lips.

"God, child, what's he done to you?" she breathed She put her arm round Suzanne's slender shoulders and guided her up to her room, where she laid her down on the bed.

"Tell Alice, dearie," she whispered "Tell all."

"There's not much you haven't guessed already," replied Suzanne "I'm married to a brute. A personable brute, a charming brute, but a brute for all that. Unfortunately—and I hope to God it isn't going to last—he seems to have shed the charm That's all there is to know, Alice."

The older woman's eyes met hers shrewdly "Is that all, my pet?" she asked "Wouldn't there be something else you'd want to confide?"

Suzanne closed her eyes and shook her head

"You sure?"

Suzanne nodded

Aram Garbisian rang soon afterward and Suzanne took the call on her bedroom extension. Yes, she assured her parent, Jock was progressing nicely and felt he would be able to come home at the end of the week and yes, he was delighted at the prospect of joining some of the Garbisian offshoots as a director Daddy sounded pleased and relieved, as well he might when his daughter had corralled for him a thirteenth earl to sit on the letterheads and add that extra touch of class that persuades governments to hand out sponsorships and subsidies, that quenches their doubts about certain marginal dealings that they might question otherwise . . .

A chambermaid knocked and entered as she was trying in

a practiced manner, learned over the years but with no success, to disentangle herself from the phone conversation with her egregious parent. The girl had an envelope, and Suzanne mimed for her to put it on the bedside table, which the other did and departed.

While she was assuring her father for the tenth time that it was neither necessary for him to fly up and hold her hand nor for Jock to be flown down for a consultation with a Harley Street neurologist whom even the Garbisian millions could not shift to Scotland, she saw her name written on the outside of the envelope —Lady Einskattle— with no address, and knew with certainty who it was from.

She listened to her parent in silence; possibly agreed to all sorts of unlikeable suggestions for her future life without a tittle of protest; and finally said goodbye to him with trembling lower lip and tears of sheer fear coursing down her cheek. The acts of reaching out, of slitting open the envelope, taking out the sheet of paper and focusing her eyes upon the contents she performed like some automaton

There was no salutation, no signature; just the stark command: *"Tonight at 9.30. My place. Don't keep me waiting."*

They had cooked her a fairly elaborate dinner that night, composed of some of the things she liked best lamb chops, peas and new potatoes, preceded by cantaloupe melon and followed by strawberry flan. In the choice, she saw the hand of Alice, who must have noticed that she had scarcely eaten for days To set the woman's mind at rest, she addressed herself to eating everything that was put in front of her, but she succeeded only in pushing it round and round the plate There seemed as much at the finish as there had been to start with. She did, however, manage to drink a whole imperial pint bottle of Veuve Cliquot, and made considerable inroads down another. And ended with a couple of large brandies

Close to the appointed time, she threw an arctic fox coat over her gold lamé dinner frock and went out into the night. That she had had too much to drink was manifested by her hitting the doorjamb of the garage on the way out. She had driven for half a mile and was approaching the turnoff lane that led to the bailiff's cottage when she was overtaken, in the bright moonlight, by a police car and flagged down to a halt.

"Did ye know that ye're driving wi'oot lights, ma'am?" The

bobby was young, soft voiced. He shone a torch, obliquely, toward Suzanne's face—and immediately reacted. "Och, 'tis Lady Einskattle Begging your pardon, m'lady."

"That's all right, officer So sorry to have bothered you. It's so light tonight that it never occurred to me . . ."

"'Tis easy done, m'lady " He stood back and saluted her. "Good night, m'lady."

"Good night, officer."

Close shave! Anyone but Lady Einskattle would have been arrested, for he must surely have smelled the brandy fumes when he put his head inside the window

"Don't keep me waiting . . "

Very much to her dismay, the police car pulled out after her and kept on her tail till she had turned off down the lane to Hemstock's place She saw the loom of its lights in her mirror as the Mini lumbered down the rutted path What would the local constabulary think of the laird's lady paying late calls upon the laird's bailiff when the laird was in hospital? And possibly with too much brandy in her at the time. Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive . .

Hemstock opened the door to her, drew her to him and embraced her with sickening intimacy

There began, then, Suzanne's descent into the uttermost depths of the hell that he had devised for her

First, he was fascinated by her arctic fox fur, which had been a wedding present from yet another of her father's diverse companies She was forced to prance around, nude save for the fur coat draped over her shoulders, while he took reels of pictures of her Then, stripping off all that he wore—a terry dressing gown he joined her for some more pictures, using the timed shutter. It was after the shame of this that Suzanne asked him if he would give her a drink.

He had whiskey It mixed badly with the champagne and the brandy, but it probably saved her from madness at the things he wrought upon her mind and body in the following hours.

Although limp and acquiescent, Suzanne still had a violent reaction to the atrocities he wrought upon her. But she finally slipped from awareness to a semihallucinatory state brought on by a narcotic drug that he had slipped into her drink.

Suzanne pulled herself out of the dreams, out of the drug-induced half-life, sometime in midmorning of the following day Hemstock had gone, for which she was profoundly glad.

He had had the grace to cover her with an eiderdown. When she had bathed and dressed, she discreetly drove the car back to the castle and offered no apologies or explanations to Alice or anyone else about her overnight absence. There was a letter for her from Ian Einskattle, short, self-congratulatory, self-regarding, after the manner of the young. He had passed the interview for the Malawi job and been accepted. One phrase struck her as being particularly wry. " . . I never would have made it but for your inspiration."

Possibly Ian was right. But it was a big price she had paid for his success.

And the loan, taken out to cover the cost, bore a compound interest which might well destroy her before the debt was discharged.

Jock was brought home, as he had threatened, at the end of the week. The trouble began immediately. Suzanne, for the sake of a quiet life and because she had decided that she no longer cared about her husband's carryings-on, had secured the services of two tolerably pretty young agency nurses from Inverness, one dark, the other sandy haired and freckled but far from being a classic blonde. The thirteenth earl glared at the latter as if she were a camel passing for a horse and made a scurrilous remark about her appearance, parentage and general inadequacies that fortunately the girl did not catch. This took place at midday. At half-past four, just as Suzanne had been served a tray of tea in her sitting room, the two nurses burst in with scarcely a knock. They were packed and dressed for departure, crimson-faced with affront. They would report *his* conduct to their Association, they informed her. And to the agency. And they had half a mind to tell the police. Suzanne made no comment, paid them a week's salary and watched them go with some regret.

That night, she and Alice took over the burden of tending the man in the master suite, who passed most of his time drenched in Einskattle malt, his thoughts drifting from bawdiness to boredom, to a manic fury against everyone and everything. None of the servants in the castle could be persuaded to carry food, drink or medication any farther than the anteroom of the suite, for the younger women were molested by the invalid, while the older ones and the menfolk had things thrown at them. So Suzanne and Alice had to be in almost constant attendance. The strain soon began to tell. For her part, Suzanne

bore Jock's half-insane ramblings, his dark sulks, the pawings and the maulings as a grim extension of her marriage vows, which, but for fear of her father's wrath, she would gladly have severed. Soldiering grimly on, she told herself that Jock's condition must improve, that she would find some way to rid herself of the threat that Hemstock dangled constantly over her head, that the whole hideous nightmare would pass. As for Alice, the woman never complained, though on one occasion when Suzanne relieved her, there was the red weal of a hand slap across her face and she looked as if she had been crying. Another time, her blouse was torn at the neck .

The night it all ended was a night like those that had dragged interminably on since Jock's return Jock had had his supper and was asleep and snoring, lolling back against his silk pillows in his brocaded dressing gown, butter blonde hair swept across his forehead, beautiful as Apollo The manservant who came to the door to pick up the empty tray also brought a fresh supply of malt whiskey With it was an envelope, the sight of which sent Suzanne's brave resolves scurrying

It was, of course, from her tormentor, brief and peremptory as ever, with a hideously implied threat "Tonight. Make it ten o'clock Got a special treat for you Be on time "

It was nine-fifteen Alice, who was resting after keeping a vigil the whole of the previous night, was due to relieve her at ten and could be relied upon implicitly If Jock continued to sleep, she could slip away in about half an hour If he woke well, if he woke she must make some excuse to leave him alone for a short while The question of disobeying Hemstock's summons never for a moment entered her mind, for she knew that, all else aside, if the bailiff betrayed her to her husband, Jock would certainly kill her.

That was the issue now that the man she had married was more than half insane.

The moon was down Her headlights picked out the winding, rutted lane that led to the bailiff's cottage She was on time, having left the sickroom at the last moment, with the blonde Adonis still snoring Alice would be with him by now she fervently hoped that the woman would have a more tranquil night than she, Suzanne, was promised

A plan had formed in her mind during her half hour wait following the arrival of the note She would make one more determined effort to buy off her tormentor He had said that

money was of no interest to him, and under the circumstances it was not hard to see why: his revenge against the Einskattle clan for the debauching of his mother and the suicide of his father took the form of debauching Einskattle's countess—and that was not the sort of revenge that could be bought and sold. And yet the notion that every man—and woman—had a price could not be ignored. Did Hemstock have a price? Something beyond vengeance, beyond animal lust? If so, she, daughter of Aram Garbisian, the seventh richest and most powerful tycoon in the world, must surely have the means to exact it from him.

Surely, also, the delights of debauching Suzanne, Countess of Einskattle, must by now be wearing thin through sheer repetition. And what lasting profit for him to be exacting his vengeance under cover of darkness, behind locked doors, in secret?

Yes, the time might well be ripe for her to make a deal with her tormentor. Tonight. And to hell with his threat of "a special treat."

There was an owl calling in the copse of trees behind the cottage, announcing the limits of his domain. He was answered by a she-owl, and the call echoed eerily in the valley below. Suzanne shivered when she got out of the car. The cottage windows were dark and she was obliged to feel her way, branch by branch, along the hornbeam bushes that lined the path to the bailiff's door.

She knocked. No answer. Nor was there a response to her second attempt.

She might have departed then, blessedly released of the indignities that were promised her, but for her new resolve to settle with Hemstock once and for all. She tried the latch of the door and found it unlocked. It creaked open to her touch.

"Are you there?" Her voice sounded insubstantial and oddly counterfeit.

Silence.

Suzanne peered into the darkness across the hallway. Somewhere there had to be a light switch: it was not by the door. Step by step, with hands extended before her, she advanced toward where the stairs should have been. She had not moved three paces before her feet came in contact with a solid form that sent her sprawling on her face, crying out with shock and pain as her cheek and shoulder connected with the hard floor

She pushed herself up by her hands, which appeared to have

found themselves in some sticky mess on the carpet: sticky, like thick gravy, and curious-smelling. Feeling around in the darkness, she could not locate whatever it was that had caused her to fall. On hands and knees now to prevent herself from tripping again, she went on till she reached the staircase, where, cautiously drawing herself to her feet and fumbling against the wall, she found the light switch almost at once. The hallway flared into pitiless brightness.

Suzanne turned. In the brightness, she saw the prone form on whose outstretched legs she must have tripped. It lay in a pool of bright blood seeping into the carpet. The head was not visible. Two paces forward and with a choked intake of breath, she saw that it had no head — or, rather, that the head terminated at the lower jaw; a fringe of black hair surrounded a bloody, empty brainpan. Screaming, driven to sudden madness, she saw that the rest of Bailiff Hemstock's skull, hair and brains were splattered over the opposite, whitewashed wall.

A double-barreled shotgun lay close by one clenched, outstretched hand.

She backed away from the sight. To run to the door, out of the place and into the concealing night meant that she would have to walk across the corpse and its spreading lake of blood. Better anything than that. There was a rear entrance in the kitchen. The kitchen lay — there. Quick. Quick. Get out of this place, away from this obscenity, away from the chains and bonds that had been so suddenly and horrifyingly cut from her wrists.

Suzanne wrenched open the door to the kitchen and switched on the light. In a corner, crouched by the wainscotting, was the huddled figure of a woman in black, whose haunted eyes met hers, whose slack lips uttered her name. "Suzanne, dearie . . ."

"Alice!"

Then Alice was running to her, clinging to her, as she herself had clung to the older woman for warmth, support and comfort so many times since childhood. The shapely, firm shoulders under her fingers were shaking with terrors unnamed.

"Is he—dead?"

Suzanne closed her eyes. "Oh, God, yes!"

"Suzanne—I—I killed him!"

"No-o-o-o!"

"I guessed all along what he was doing to you. This morn

ing, I came and challenged him. He didn't bother to deny it. He laughed in my face. He—"

"Hush, Alice, dear. Hush." She comforted the sobbing woman as one will try to comfort a newly bereaved child.

"He said — he said that since I was so concerned for you, perhaps I might like to—to—the way he put it was, 'shoulder her ladyship's burden'—that was what he said."

·Oh, *no!"* breathed Suzanne.

"I—I thought he meant that if I let him –use me, he would leave you in peace, dearie. So I—"

"Alice—*Alice!"*

They clung together: the young and the older woman, separated by age and circumstance; united by experience, by understanding, by their mutual love

Presently, calmer, Alice continued. "I did everything he asked of me. No, don't weep for me, dearie, I would do it again a thousand times to spare you. No regrets there, none at all." She shook her head with a sudden, wild remembrance. "But it was no use No use! That creature—that animal—only wanted to use us both He said—he said, 'I'll bet you two appetizing little dykes perform well together, so tonight we'll make a threesome of it.' A threesome, that's what he said."

("Got a special treat for you. Be on time . . .")

"He said I was to be here at nine-thirty and you'd be along later. But I came early. There was murder on my mind, though I hadn't the slightest idea how it was to be done But chance providence—put the weapon in my hand. When I came in, he was sitting out there in the hall, polishing the barrel of his gun and grinning across at me. 'Take your clothes off and slip into bed,' he tells me. 'I'll be with you in a minute, and her ladyship won't keep us waiting long.'

"There was a fire in my mind then. I struck out at him, uncaring. And me with my bare hands what could I do against such as he? But, like I said, there was providence working for me, for the both of us. As I struck at him, the barrel of the gun flew out of his hand He grabbed at it, clumsylike. There was a thunderous crash, the like of which I pray never to hear again. And when it was all over, he was—he was—his head was . . ."

"No more! No more, Alice!" breathed Suzanne, pulling her close. "He's dead, now—dead!"

"It had to be providence, it had to be." Alice's voice was

muffled against her shoulder "How else would such a man, with all his experience, be cleaning a gun that had a cartridge inside it, all ready to kill?" She lifted her head. Her eyes sought the confirmation in Suzanne's. "Call it the hand of providence, call it the hand of God, but wasn't it written in the stars that that animal should die today?"

"It was fate, Alice," replied Suzanne.

"It was indeed," said the older woman "Though, to tell you the truth, I wish I had not had a hand in the killing of a fellow human creature, no matter how black his soul "

"It's all over, Alice," said Suzanne, upon whose mind and heart a great calm, a great resolve, had fallen. "Finished and done with. We are free—the both of us."

Alice stared at her questioningly. "But—what's to happen, dearie?" she breathed.

"We're going away," replied Suzanne "Away from this place, away from Einskattle, away from slavery of the mind and the body, away from my marriage that is no marriage away to freedom."

The other woman shook her head, bemused "But I've killed a man," she said "How shall I escape?"

"It was suicide," declared Suzanne And upon that declaration, she felt strength surging back into her veins "He killed himself, and no one will be able to prove otherwise. As for the two of us, Alice—we're leaving now. Tonight. Together. Wait!" The hideous thought struck her "The photos! I've got to find the photos and destroy them!"

"Why, they're in his wallet," declared Alice "He brought them out and forced me to look at them."

"Thank God —thank God!" Suzanne was already rifling the pockets of the still-warm corpse

They caught a night flight out of Inverness, leaving Suzanne's Mini to its fate in the airport parking lot, just as they had left the half-headless corpse of their tormentor to its first night of eternal rest in the empty cottage and just as Suzanne had left her husband of only a few months

No one gave more than an admiring glance to the two women, the younger one wearing an arctic fox fur over gold lame, the older in black with a shawl over her head Neither of them carrying baggage. Suzanne had her handbag and paid for their first-class tickets with a credit card As the airplane banked over the long tongue of the Moray Firth and shaped a course

southward, she leaned back against the seat's headrest, closed her eyes and directed her teeming mind to concentrate upon the practicalities.

As for the telltale fingerprints, they had wiped the door handles and the light switches, though God knew where else in the cottage the pair of them must have left their mark. Still, she told herself, if the authorities assumed suicide (Hemstock's father had committed suicide, and didn't it run in families?), they might not look too closely for clues to another reason for the violent death. Lady Einskattle and her maid, surely, would be among the last to be connected with the tragic passing of the estate bailiff.

"Coffee, madam?" A stewardess was bending over her, bright eyed, unspoiled. She had felt that way once.

"No, thank you."

"Your friend's asleep. I won't wake her."

"No. Best not."

Alice asleep looked younger than her years, the firm bosom rising and falling, shapely hands folded across her lap, long-lashed eyelids closed upon the slope of the cheeks. Oh, Alice, what am I going to do about you — you who did what you did for my sake?

Back to practicalities . . .

Lady Einskattle's connection with bailiff Hemstock. Well, there had been only the shameful photographs, now blessedly torn into fragments and burned by the roadside on the way to Inverness, ashes ground underfoot. No danger there any longer.

Another practicality, perhaps the most urgent, was why, on the night of Hemstock's tragic death, were she and her maid fleeing from Einskattle, from Scotland, with nothing but what they stood up in and a handbag between them. That might take some explaining.

In the middle of trying to assemble an answer to that riddle, Suzanne fell asleep. She woke to a smooth voice enjoining the passengers to fasten seatbelts, put out cigarettes and be prepared to land at Heathrow.

Alice's hand sought hers—Alice was terrified of flying. Minutes later they were joining the long trails of people filing up the forlorn, long corridors in the chill dawn; out into the crowded concourse with the bustling folk, rattling trolleys, the smell of coffee.

"Let's have coffee," said Suzanne. "Then we'll get a taxi to take us to Sloane Square. Find a table while I go and get a

paper, to see if there's any news about" she dropped her voice, stole a guilty glance over her shoulder—"you know "

Alice's eyes flared in terror "Surely they won't have found him already!" she whispered.

"Almost certainly not," replied Suzanne, "but we'd better know if they have."

There was a queue at the newspaper and magazine stand, and Suzanne's anxious eye roved over the rows of print displayed there. The headlines of the national dailies announced yet another crisis in the Persian Gulf, almost upstaged by a sensational terrorist kidnapping in Rome As she drew nearer, she saw the local London papers, among them the *Courier*, in which the gossip columnist had so often given her a rough ride in the past. The *Courier* also featured the Gulf and kidnapping stories on the front page, but as Suzanne groped for money in her handbag, she saw a newspaper photo of a face she knew as well as her own She fumbled in the bag and nearly dropped it in her haste to reveal the headline beneath the *Courier* picture

SUDDEN END OF INTERNATIONAL TYCOON
ARAM GARBISIAN DIES OF HEART ATTACK

Alice had found a table in the buffet and ordered coffee She looked round at Suzanne's approach and was shocked to see the other's expression.

"Dearie, what's happened? Have they " She saw the newspaper in Suzanne's hand and leaped to a conclusion

"Daddy's dead!"

"Oh, my God!"

"He died last evening they say Someone must have rung me at the castle by now but I'm not there " She sat down, dazed with a sudden bewilderment and a sense of loss that was only half perceived, as when one walks out of bright sunlight into a dense mist that cannot be accounted for

"But how—*how?*"

"It happened in Birmingham Funny, Daddy detested Birmingham " She felt her eyes prickle with the first tears "They suggest that he'd been overworking and I suppose they're right He always does always did He was having dinner alone in his hotel when he suddenly collapsed and died just like that One instant he was alive, the next he was gone "

"Oh, Suzanne, love, I'm so sorry " Alice knew the board,

composed of part adoration and part aversion, that had united her young mistress with her widowed father.

"They say here that he was the end of the old-style tycoons," said Suzanne. "The last of the merchant adventurers, they call him. 'With the passing of Aram Garbisian,'" she read aloud, "'it does not strain the cliché to declare that we have witnessed the close of an era.'"

The close of an era, also, for Suzanne, Countess of Einskattle, née Garbisian—and in rounder, harsher, more devastating terms than she could ever have believed

PART III

The Idyll

Chapter 1

Aram Garbisian died over dinner on a Thursday evening in his plush Birmingham five star hotel. By the opening of the stock market next morning, it was apparent that the "last of the old style tycoons," the "merchant adventurer" had never pulled off so timely a deal as his quitting of this Vale of Tears. By noon, the Garbisian empire and all its ramifications could have been picked up for peanuts. By this time, also, the heavy mob from Fleet Street was besieging the mansion in Sloane Square, demanding admission to see Lady Einskattle, who, as they now knew, had made a flying trip down from Scotland the night before.

The butler kept them out, at her ladyship's instructions, though not even the Einskattle title was able to prevent the *Courier* from taking possession, at enormous expense, of a vacated house immediately opposite the mansion and setting up a round the clock battery of cameras, with long-distance lenses, to shoot anyone who was permitted entry to the building across the square, and furthermore to take pictures of anything that could be seen moving behind the discreetly draped windows.

Shortly after luncheon, by prior appointment over the telephone, a gentleman in a clerical gray suit and bowler hat paid off a taxi outside the mansion, bounded up the steps, running the gauntlet of the pressmen, gave a knock and was instantly admitted. He was the dead tycoon's principal lawyer.

Suzanne received him in the drawing room at the rear of the house, whose windows looked out over the landscaped city garden that had once been graced by her wedding marquee and

nine hundred guests. She knew the visitor well His name was Jacques, and he had been one of those present on that memorable, far-off night, at the dinner table under the stars of Corfu, when she had unwittingly betrayed Mummy and her gigolo before the assembled company. Since then, to a degree, and certainly since she had grown old enough to appreciate the enormity of her gaffe, she had never felt at her ease with Mr Jacques, who, all other considerations aside, was not a warm man, a person in whose presence one could relax and unburden

There he was now: seated on the edge of the upright chair that he had selected in response to her invitation to sit down, briefcase on his knees, myopic, cold eyes regarding her warily from behind rimless pebble glasses, pinched mouth a straight line of disapproval

"What is the situation, Mr Jacques?" asked Suzanne "What's this disaster you spoke of over the phone?"

He cleared his throat and took from his briefcase a sheaf of papers tied with pink ribbon, which he proceeded to untie and lay out.

"Well, Lady Einskattle," he began, "I must first hasten to point out that I am not a party to the present situation, nor, indeed, have I been privy to the details of the late Mr. Garbisian s business affairs in all the time I have been associated with him My hands, I may say, are clean I have obeyed instructions I have always carried out those instructions with due regard for the proprieties, for the letter and the spirit of the laws of this land, and I—"

"Spare me your excuses, Mr Jacques, I beg you," interposed Suzanne dryly, "and come straight to the point. What *is* the situation of which you spoke?"

Affront and righteous indignation burned behind the pebble glasses, but there was no question that he might take offense and leave her, his visit was intended more to wash his own hands of the Garbisian affair than to apprise her of the general picture following her father's death

The general picture, as Jacques described it, stripped of circumlocution, legal and financial jargon, was a knell of doom . . .

The Garbisian empire was, and long had been, a sham. Suzanne was the heiress to one of the largest international financial frauds ever perpetrated!

Aram Garbisian's death had clearly been brought on by the

strain of keeping alive a ramshackle edifice which, for the last twelve months at least, had set knowledgeable heads shaking in Leadenhall Street, Wall Street and the Paris Bourse – if nowhere else. The empire fell apart immediately upon his death when he was not on the phone first thing in the morning buying shares with money he did not possess, selling stock he did not own, shifting nonexistent credits between London and Zurich, between New York and the Cayman Islands, asset-stripping, bidding and counterbidding, liquidating companies and building new ones, phoenixlike, upon their ashes. The Garbisian empire did not last any longer than it took for its owner's corpse to grow cold.

"What now, then, Mr. Jacques?" asked Suzanne, wondering at her calmness, her unsuspected fortitude.

"The Fraud Squad of Scotland Yard is even now ransacking my office," declared the lawyer, a line of sweat on his upper lip. "It is inevitable that I shall be involved, like yourself, in the prosecutions that must follow."

"Prosecutions?" She stared at him disbelievingly. "But why should *I* be prosecuted?"

He smiled for the first time since the interview had begun; it was a smile devoid of either mirth or fellow feeling. "I would point out, ma'am," he said, "that, in your capacity as chairman and major shareholder in the Durable Assets Company, you are very much involved in the collapse of the Garbisian interests. And, indeed, as major beneficiary of the Garbisian estate, it is quite likely that you will be adjudged a bankrupt."

"Bankrupt?" She shook her head, gestured about her: to the Corot landscape over the Adam chimneypiece, to the priceless Persian and antique Chinese rugs, the Carolinian silverware. The motion encompassed, by implication, the vast personal riches of the Garbisians: the estate in Ireland, the villa in Corfu, duplex apartment on New York's East Side, penthouse suites galore, the airplanes, the yacht *Beguine* . . .

"Totally inadequate to meet the demands of your creditors, ma'am," declared Jacques, and he smiled again. "I doubt if, when all is realized, you will be able to pay off more than twenty-five pence on the pound after death duties."

Fighting against the sensation that she was being carried out to sea in the grip of a great undertow, Suzanne could only pace from the chimneypiece to the window and back again, hand pressed to her brow.

"I'm ignorant of all this business, Mr. Jacques," she said at length. "You must continue to advise me as you advised my father."

No such thought resided in the cold heart that lurked within Lawyer Jacques's pigeon chest. "I cannot continue to act for your family, ma'am," he said, "and the question of the considerable fees that I am owed by the estate are of no consequence in determining my position." He lay his hand on his breast and directed his unaccommodating features into an expression suggesting selflessness. "The money is of no account, no account whatsoever. But I am already deeply involved in the affairs of your late father—though innocently, as I shall prove in open court if necessary. It would be out of the question to further jeopardize my professional reputation by continuing to act for you."

It occurred to Suzanne that she must have known Jacques for all of twenty years, during which time he had been one of the fat cats in the inner circle of her father's confidence. And had he done that without soiling his fingers? Could he possibly not have been concerned in all the shady dealings that were being hinted at in the papers? And at considerable profit, surely To her knowledge he owned a town house in Mayfair, as well as a tax loss farm in Norfolk. He had married three times, in every case to a lady ten years younger than her predecessor Here was one party, at least, who had not done too badly out of the Garbisian empire.

"Good day to you, Mr Jacques," she said, extending her hand to him "So kind of you to call and put me in the picture. I hope you will not be called upon to suffer too much for your long and faithful service to my father "

He swallowed hard and blinked nervously behind the pebble glasses. The hand that briefly took hers was limp and coldly moist He exuded, at close quarters, a peculiar stink that touched a chord of remembrance in her mind Not till he had gone did she make the connection. A few years ago, while traveling from her finishing school in Lausanne, the rather bumpy flight over the Alps was escalated to high drama by the appearance of fire in one of the wing engines The man sitting next to her in the first-class compartment —a middle-aged professor of logic who had been engaging her, a nubile and attractive eighteen year old, in a very pointed dialogue about her views on sex outside marriage immediately fell silent and addressed

his entire attention through the window to the streak of black smoke, occasionally pierced with jets of orange flame, that was emitted by the engine as the aircraft commenced its long descent to an emergency landing. Presently Suzanne had been aware of a curious stink coming from her companion, whose head and the back of his neck were bathed in sweat. When the order came to fasten seatbelts for what turned out to be a successful landing, the professor swiveled his anguished eyes to meet hers and she saw the answer there.

She had smelled the exudations of naked terror on the man.

And she had smelled it again on lawyer Jacques.

That night, Suzanne felt obliged to write to her husband and put their affairs in perspective as far as she was concerned. After a dozen attempts, most of which got no farther than the second line, she cobbled together a letter which, despite its inadequacies, came somewhere near to frankness.

De Vere House
Sloane Square,
London.

Friday the 9th

Dear Jock,

I am sorry, but in the middle of your troubles following the accident, I have to tell you that I am not returning to you. The gulf that lies between us is, I feel, too wide and too deep for either of us to bridge. I do not have the strength, you, I think, do not have the inclination.

As I understand it, you will be able to petition for a divorce after I have been away for three years. Divorce in this country is not now the unpleasant business it used to be. No more, so I am told, than filling in a form, and one does not even need to appear in court and answer embarrassing questions.

You will have heard and read about Daddy's death, which has affected me more than I would have believed. The unpleasantness which is being whipped up by the media regarding his various business dealings has made things no easier. Poor Daddy, he is well out of it! I have

to attend his funeral at Highgate on Tuesday and don't know how I shall see it through without breaking down.

Look after yourself, Jock, and make a good, quick recovery from your injury.

Kind regards,

very sincerely,

Suzanne

That same evening, the late editions carried, under the headline EARL'S BAILIFF FOUND DEAD, a brief account of Hemstock's death, an occurrence to which, said the report, the local police attached no suspicion of foul play, though there was to be an inquest.

It had rained all day Monday with the sort of persistence that made one feel it could go on forever Tuesday was no better At three o'clock, Suzanne and Alice left Sloane Square to a flaring battery of photography, boarded the hired Daimler limousine and were driven to the funeral with a police motorcycle escort. The rain was pounding, knee-high from the road and pavements all the way.

The funeral cortege awaited them at the gates of the cemetery, a hearse containing the coffin and a couple of cars bearing a dozen or so of the dead man's employees, mostly humble clerks and minor functionaries who had served the tycoon most of their working lives; none of his partners, none of the inner circle that had assisted in the manipulation of the great empire, no one from the British government to whom the dead man's estate stood in hock to the tune of fifty million Suzanne looked in vain for a representative of the clubs, the City Livery Companies, of which Daddy had been a member, for emissaries from the institutions that the Garbisian Trust had benefited — hospitals in Britain, South America, the Middle East and black Africa; not to mention a Cambridge college that now possessed a Garbisian Library, or a discreet Home for Fallen Women in Southeast London And not a sign of Mr Lawyer Jacques

The hired Daimler rolled slowly down the pathway through the cemetery, past the glowering brows of Karl Marx's iron bust set high upon his plinth, past monuments to the great and the small, till it came to the hole where the little boy who had witnessed horror on a mountain pass in Anatolia was to find everlasting rest nearly three quarters of a century later

They stood in the streaming rain of North London: Suzanne and Alice, the only women, and Nubar and all the other little people of the Garbisian empire who had come to mourn the departing of a man who, for all his faults, had been a good boss to the faithful and hard working. Fifteen people in all, plus the officiating priest and the undertaker's men.

And about a hundred reporters, press photographers, TV cameramen, and assorted rubbernecks.

"Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery . . ."

Suzanne watched as the undertaker's men trudged slowly through the oozing mud, carrying the coffin, and tried to assemble kindly thoughts about her departed parent. All that would come out, however, were recollections of the dreadful rows with her mother and lately with herself, and how he would never have countenanced her separation from Jock but would have used every means—threats, bribery, flattery and just plain blackmail—to get her to return so that he could keep the Einskattle name and title on his letterheads.

"Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts . "

There was the night, she recalled, when Mummy had taken the overdose of sleeping pills and he had insisted on having her, a ten-year-old child, dragged out of bed to accompany him to the hospital behind the ambulance, and how they had sat huddled together in the hospital waiting room, in silence and the dead, dark hours just before dawn when the soul most easily sloughs off its mortal skin; and how she had never since been able to abide hospitals and waiting rooms.

". . . We therefore commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes . . "

The undertaker's men lowered the plain pine coffin into the streaming earth, and the ceremonies were all but over. The clergyman, reading his prayer book from under a dripping umbrella, looked like a drowned black crow. The TV cameras whirred.

No sooner had the coffin been laid to rest and the ropes gathered in by the undertaker's men than a taxi drew to a halt at the edge of the pathway close to the newly dug grave and a pale young man in dark overcoat and bowler hat stepped out, carrying a briefcase. After a moment's reflection he crossed over to Suzanne.

"Do I address Lady Einskattle?" he asked, doffing his hat.

"Yes," responded she, surprised.

He delved in his briefcase. "I represent Messrs. Biddle, Biddle, Skipchase and Nunn, solicitors, your ladyship," he said. "And our client, Lord Einskattle, has instructed us to deliver this letter to you personally, by hand, at this particular place and time. I—I am really most sorry, ma'am." And he genuinely looked sorry.

The clergyman was closing his prayer book and the few mourners were filing past the gaping hole in the ground as Suzanne slit open the envelope with her thumbnail. The TV cameramen missed nothing of the incident and zoomed in on her expression as she read the contents.

> . . . Our client instructs us to call to your attention the outstanding charges for repairs and improvements put in hand by your late father upon the fabric of Castle Einskattle, amounting to the round total of £1,000,750.25 (one million, seven hundred and fifty pounds, twenty-five pence), and to request that you discharge the debt forthwith . . .

Oh, Jock, Jock, has it come to this, then? A far cry, you, from the blonde Adonis who won my heart and took me in the queen's garden all of a summer's afternoon!

The sheer malevolence of the demand showed nakedly through the lawyers' jargon, compounded by the instructions that she was to be handed the missive at her father's graveside.

This, then, was Jock Einskattle's response to her letter setting out her plans.

A smack in the face . . . and calculated right down to the last twenty-five pence.

Suzanne found a firm of solicitors to act for her in the nightmare weeks that followed, weeks when her house was violated by total strangers who, so it seemed, had a perfect right to take possession of her goods and chattels by docketing them in their notebooks, marking them with chalked numerals and brown paper labels, and then settle themselves down as uninvited guests in her house, to be fed and wateted while they watched over the contents of the house in case, presumably, she made off with anything.

The Garbisian scandal . . . as the press and TV dubbed it – provided a heaven-sent news story for the media now that the holiday season was over and the nights were drawing in. Cast

as the villain was a crooked entrepreneur—a foreigner, moreover, which aroused the hot blood of the xenophobic British man-in-the-street, who saw the dead tycoon as a guy of distinctly suspect ancestry who had come over and stolen the bread from out of the mouths of decent British working people. The matter of the fifty million pounds that the villain of the piece had sweet talked out of the British government was made much of by Her Majesty's Opposition at question time in the House, when the Prime Minister was keenly, not to say sharply, probed about the issue. The P.M. went out on a limb and stated that the fifty million would be the first call upon the Garbrsian estate, and if that were not practicable then an act of Parliament would be rushed through to make it so.

The heroine of the plot—painted in varying hues depending upon the particular social coloration of the medium concerned—was the dead man's daughter and heiress. Predictably, Seymour Morell of the *Courier* really went to town: the column had a bonanza with a flashback of Suzanne's wild goings on—real and imaginary—when she had been a student and somewhere got hold of the fact that she and Jock Einskattle were separated. For good measure, they even got the story of the row over the redheaded air hostess off the spike, dusted it down and served it up as supportive evidence of the Einskattle split.

It was a bereft and bewildered Suzanne who was summoned, one dreary, damp November afternoon, to the Bankruptcy Court. An hour or so later, having sat through an incomprehensible exchange of legal and financial hot air, she was declared to be bankrupt. The spry old gentleman who presided over these proceedings, eyeing her benevolently over his spectacles, observed that Lady Einskattle was clearly quite innocent of all blame regarding the criminal state of the Garbisian interests and hoped that her ladyship would find her feet again. Suzanne thanked him and retired from the court with the knowledge that she possessed her quite modest wardrobe of clothes, the clothes she stood up in and the cash in her handbag, amounting in all to a hundred and fifty-odd pounds. The credit card companies had already written to inform her that they had withdrawn their facilities.

She went home to Sloane Square and Alice. The house was up for sale and carried a billboard to that effect. The bailiff's men were still in possession, though nothing had been removed. By a mutual arrangement with the powers that be, she had been given till the following evening to pack her few things and

depart. Alice had found for them a cheap, two-bedroom furnished apartment on a short lease in Pimlico, and there Suzanne planned to stay till she had got herself organized. Getting organized meant finding the means to keep herself, either by selling her paintings or getting a job teaching art.

Facing penury for the first time in her life was a concept that she had the greatest difficulty in encompassing. One evening her taxi was caught up in the rush hour, and when she peeled off one of her fast dwindling five pound notes, she was brought up with a jolt to see how little change she was given. As was her custom, she gave the cabbie a pound tip. After a moment's reflection on the sidewalk, watching the taxi depart, she realized that henceforth she would have to use the underground or the buses just like everyone else.

Alice greeted her in the hall, all concern, kissing her cheek and patting her arm.

"Dearie, how did it go? You look so tired. Oh, what have they done to my darling?"

"It wasn't too bad," said Suzanne. "The man in charge took a bit of a fancy to me. I think if I'd been wearing a tight sweater, I might have done even better. As it is, I'm not going to be sent to prison or anything. I'm just plain broke, that's all."

"Oh, what a relief!" cried her maid. "I tell you, I've been walking on eggs all day. When I think of what happened to those gentlemen who used to work for Mr. Garbisian!"

The inner circle of Aram Garbisian's empire, lawyer Jacques included, had been arrested and brought before the magistrates on numerous charges of fraudulent conversion, exchange control violations, tax evasion and the like, and had been remanded on bail with their passports confiscated, to await trial at the Old Bailey.

"God, I could do with a cup of tea," said Suzanne.

Alice looked guarded. "Leave tea for a while, duckie," she said. "You've got a visitor."

"A visitor? Who?"

"Wouldn't give her name. Young woman. A bit flighty-looking. Said you knew her. I put her in the drawing room. Maybe it would be best if you went and had a word with her, and maybe saw her on her way without inviting her to tea."

Suzanne nodded. "All right. Wonder who she is? Flighty-looking, you say?"

She opened the door of the drawing room, and a tall figure

of a woman by the window whirled round to meet her gaze. She was blonde, pink cheeked and was dragging heavily on a cigarette. Suzanne recognized her at once

"Tricia the stewardess from the amphibian!"

"I'm not a stewardess any more," declared the other with a touch of sharpness "I'm a model."

"Good for you," replied Suzanne

"I've got something to tell you," said the other challengingly The declaration having been delivered, she took a deep pull on her cigarette and exhaled gustily

Suzanne cast a glance down the other's figure. "If my husband made you pregnant," she said, "I have to hand it to you for a marvelous job of concealment Is *that* what you've got to tell me?"

"No, I'm *not* pregnant!" retorted the girl, and sneered at the thought.

"Of course not," said Suzanne "It's only the good girls who fall, the bad girls know better."

"I didn't come here to be insulted!" snapped Tricia.

Suzanne walked over to the sofa and sat down, kicking off her shoe and tucking one leg under her. She eyed the blonde with a devastating calm.

"Really?" she said "Then what *did* you come here for, pray?"

The hand that held the cigarette was unsteady She's been driven by some compulsion to come and see me, thought Suzanne. What is it? Money, probably. Another one of the vultures coming down from the surrounding trees to pick at the Garbisian carcass a smaller, weaker variety of vulture, perhaps; the kind that wait till their bigger brethren have had their fill and departed, then peck the gleanings from the near white bones.

"Your husband," declared the ex stewardess, "did me a physical injury."

"You should be more careful about whom you go to bed with," replied Suzanne.

Again, her bland retort roused the ire of her uninvited guest "All you can do is insult me!" blazed Tricia "You and all your millions and your title. I've read some of the stuff they've been printing about your private life in the papers, so *you've* got no reason to look down on me and treat me like dirt."

Suzanne waited a few moments and then said, "Why don't you take a seat and calm down? Tell me exactly what you came here to tell me."

The girl went sulkily to a chair and threw herself down, pouting. "I don't know where to begin," she said. "That man, that husband of yours, he's ruined my professional career, he has."

"Begin at the beginning," advised Suzanne. "And the beginning, I suppose, took place on the amphibian to Venice—or so my husband was pleased to inform me."

The other had the grace to look ashamed. "I wouldn't have looked at him twice," she said, "but he told me that you and he had an understanding. He said that you didn't have any inhibitions between you about—you know—*that*."

"Did he now?" replied Suzanne. "Well, that was certainly very enterprising of him. So, having with some difficulty persuaded you to join in the delights of our wedding night, what then? He fixed you up in a hotel in Venice to await his attentions. That was convenient for you both."

The slightest touch of irony seemed to enrage the girl. "Convenient be damned!" she blazed. "At the end of it, he left me to settle the hotel bill, and when I came back to England and tried to get my job back, Captain Struthers told me I was fired!"

Mindful of her companion's sensibilities, Suzanne did not comment; instead, she asked, "What happened to spoil things—I mean, when they had begun so well between you? And how and where did he injure you physically?"

The girl lit herself another cigarette from the butt of the old one; her forefingers were dark brown with nicotine and the nails were none too clean. "He beat me up," she said. "Your husband beat me up 'cause I wouldn't play his game."

Suzanne decided to let that one pass for the time being. "And what particular harm did you suffer?" she asked.

For answer, the other raised her head and pressed her forefinger against her nose. Grotesquely, the flesh collapsed like a pup tent deprived of its supporting struts and flattened out against her cheekbones. "He broke my nose," she said. "Can't you see? Wasn't it the first thing that struck you when you set eyes on me again? I had to have the broken cartilage removed in hospital, but I don't have the money to pay for cosmetic surgery, to have it properly shaped and set up again. That's why I've come to you."

"I see," said Suzanne. And saw very well. "And you need this cosmetic surgery very urgently, yes?"

"It's my career!" cried the girl. "I'm into modeling, but my agent—who's been very kind, very good to me—says I'll

never make the top end of the market—the glossy magazines, you know, and that kind of thing while my nose is like it is And I used to have a perfect nose!" She sat back, pulled defiantly on her cigarette and glowered across at Suzanne

"How much?" asked the latter.

Surprise and delight illuminated the girl's almost perfect but none too intelligent features. "That's very nice of you—er—my lady," she declared. "They quoted me three hundred and ninety pounds. That's with two days' stay and after-care," she added confidentially. "And very highly recommended."

"I offer you about a hundred and twenty five pounds," said Suzanne. "On conditions."

"A hundred and twenty-five!" The other spat out the phrase like a curse "But that's less than half of what I need!"

"I can do no better," replied Suzanne. "Why not ask your agent for an advance on your present earnings? You are still doing modeling work, I suppose?"

The girl pouted. "The stuff I'm doing doesn't pay too well," she said "That's underwear and things And artistic poses And he tells me that I'm already overexposed in this field "

"I see," said Suzanne.

"So if you won't help me any better, I'll have to go to your husband," declared the other "He's got plenty of money. Castle in Scotland and acres of highlands and all that I saw it on the TV last night."

Suzanne quenched an impulse to laugh. "Broke though I am, my dear," she said, "I should think my husband is a great deal worse off. He hasn't got a penny of loose change to bless himself with, and, since I've been able to pay off only a quarter of the outstanding bills for repairs on the castle, is in hock for about three quarters of a million."

The girl sneered "Then why doesn't he sell something?" she shrilled "A few pictures, a few acres of land, even those two lolloping great dogs they showed on TV?"

Suzanne explained carefully, "Nothing's his to sell Everything is entailed by law, in trust to the earl that comes after Every stick and stone, so that when he dies, his brother takes over the title and the same burden God help him "

The girl looked bemused, this was obviously all news to her "But what do people do in a situation like that?" she demanded "I mean, where do they get the income to keep up places like that castle and all?"

"They scratch it up where they can," replied Suzanne "By

letting tourists crawl around the place at seventy-five pence a head, by organizing hunting parties for wealthy foreigners. Or they just marry rich heiresses like me. Only I turned out to be not rich after all. Poor Jock." To her dismay, she discovered that she was crying. She got up and went over to the drinks trolley. "Look here, I was dying for a cup of tea when I came in, but now I'm going to pour myself a large gin and tonic. And you will join me."

"I don't mind if I do," replied the other.

Suzanne, having now kicked off both her shoes, returned to the center of the room with the two brimming glasses and, handing one to the girl, raised the other in a toast.

"Here's to us, Miss er ."

"Fosset," supplied the other. "Pat Fosset. Tricia's my working name."

"Here's to us, Miss Fosset! The women! There's none like us!" Suzanne took a long pull of her glass, picked up her handbag, squatted down on the carpet, opened and upturned the bag so that the contents were scattered before her. "Let's see what I have, Miss Fosset, and half of what I have shall be yours. After all, one could say that you had fifty percent of my wedding night, and possibly the best half. Sit down."

Tricia Fosset remained standing, though she very quickly made inroads into her drink, she stared uncomprehendingly at the beautiful brunette at her feet as Suzanne, taking a wad of five pound notes from her crocodile-skin wallet, proceeded to count them out into two piles.

"One for you, one for me—one for you, one for me—and another one for you and another one for me . . ."

"You're crazy!" declared Tricia Fosset. "You're out of your mind!"

Suzanne paused, drained her drink, tapped the side of her nose, winked. "There is a method in my madness, my dear Miss Fosset," she declared. "One for you, one for me . . ."

At the end of it, there were two sizeable piles of banknotes lying between her stockinged feet. Her task done, she gestured to her companion and to one of the piles.

"Half of what I have is yours. Help yourself. Sorry it won't pay for your new nose, but it's the best I can do. The rest you will have to raise elsewhere. I'm sure you'll find a way."

And then, as Tricia Fosset's by no means hesitant hand reached down to take the money, Suzanne's fingers closed

about the other's slim wrist tightly, savagely, so that the girl cried out with shock and pain.

"There's a condition," hissed Suzanne "I told you there was a condition, and it will be met before you get a penny."

"I—I don't know what you mean!" faltered the girl, rubbing her bruised wrist

"I'll enlighten you," replied Suzanne She laid the pile of notes in question before the girl's feet "You get this when you tell me exactly what it was that my husband demanded of you that night in Venice that so outraged what he described to me as your lower-middle-class scruples that he felt obliged to beat you up Out with it, Miss Fosset. If you want your money, you're going to have to sing for it."

Again that sullen pout. "I don't think it's right. There's things a person doesn't want to talk about "

"Okay," responded Suzanne, gathering up the pile of notes. "Keep your tender secrets to yourself "

"Wait!"

Suzanne waited. "Yes? Go on."

"He had this fantasy, you see. It was really kinky."

"Yes, it would be. Go on."

"Well, he wanted me to act like a very young girl—no more than a kid, really, while he played some kind of savage. He had a name for it, I don't really remember what "

"Bashi-bazouk," supplied Suzanne.

The baby-blue eyes widened with surprise "That's right Fancy you knowing."

"Go on."

"Well, he was going to be one of these -what you said—and he was going to –well . ."

"Rape you," supplied Suzanne "Repeatedly. To which you refused to comply So he started to beat you up "

"Well, actually, since it was only in play . ."

"You did comply. Well, why not? It's all the same thing, really, particularly when, as you say, it's all in play. So what happened then, after the—for want of a better word—play?"

The girl wrinkled her flawed nose in some distaste "Then he wanted to tie me to a sofa," she said "He had a whip with him, though he promised faithfully only to use it in play, you know. He said he was going to pretend to —" Her hands stole, instinctively and protectively, to her generous bosom

"He was going to pretend to flog your breasts off," said

Suzanne dully. She pushed the pile of notes toward the girl. "Okay, you've sung for your supper, Miss Fosset. Take your money and good luck to you."

Later, when Tricia Fosset had gone and she was having a quiet drink with Alice, Suzanne said, "Do you know, Alice, I'm fifty percent poorer now than I was an hour ago, but richer by the fact that I've washed myself clean of the last lingering doubt I may have had about Jock Einskattle He *is* a beast and a monster, and I'm to blame in a way. I supplied him with a fantasy that could have ended in—" She covered her face with her hands "What I mean is, that girl's probably lucky to be alive!"

Their flat was in St George's Square, a stone's throw from the Thames embankment and light years, socially, from Sloane Square They moved in the following morning with their few belongings. Of all the things that Suzanne had possessed, the sole items that had not been under dispute by the bailiff's men had been her paints, easel, and her unfinished pictures. Thanks to an ancient, stubborn British law, no man or woman, however vile, may be dispossessed of the tools of his or her trade.

She immediately phoned two Bond Street galleries where she had once exhibited. They were both a little cagey: yes, they'd be delighted to take a few of her pictures on the usual terms, that's to say, on fifty percent commission But not yet. Not just now. Both galleries were fully stocked for their winter exhibitions It struck Suzanne that the Garbisian scandal, and her part in it as portrayed by the *Courier* and others, was not even going to win her the advantage of a *succès de scandale*.

Next she tried a private, expensive and very trendy private art school in Chelsea that was run by a certain Dominick Laurelle, whom she had met many times at student parties, discos and the like He had always wildly praised her work in an avant-garde art newsletter that he put out

Laurelle was far from encouraging "Sorry, dah ling. Not taking on any new teaching staff There simply isn't the bread around Gone are the days when I could fill this place with panting little debutantes who didn't have the brains to get themselves into a university.

"So sorry, but I'm working on a shoestring Even *I* have to double with cleaning out the loos and polishing the front door knocker And so *desperately* sorry to hear about your little troubles, dah-ling . . ."

That night, she and Alice had their first real disagreement.

It began over the silliest thing Suzanne had gone shopping at the supermarket that afternoon. Not an epoch making event by normal standards, but something of an experience for her. Even as a student in patched jeans, she had never bought food or cooked even the simplest meal

Alice had cooked a simple supper of savory omelette, salad and caramel cream. Suzanne went on and on about her voyage through the supermarket; she simply could not get it out of her mind.

"These women," she said, "I wouldn't have believed the burdens they have to bear. One child in a wheelchair, one at the breast, one tugging at the skirts and another one on the way. And their dialogue—fantastic. No wonder Cockney humor, along with Jewish humor, is the most cutting and devastating of all.

"There was this young mother at the checkout counter, Alice She couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen, with a tiny baby in a pram. Then this other girl about her own age comes up to her in the queue and says, 'Hello, ducks, I didn't know you'd had a baby Isn't he lovely? Boy or girl? How old?'

"And the other girl replies, 'Eighteen months Think of it Tied eighteen months to a screaming shit machine!'"

Alice pushed her plate aside and grimaced with distaste.

"Do you have to go on like that?" she said tersely

"I'm sorry, Alice, if I've disgusted you," said Suzanne "It was quite unintentional."

The older woman rose to her feet and fetched a pack of cigarettes from her handbag Suzanne did not even know that she smoked, she had never done so before in her company

"Alice, what s wrong?" asked Suzanne.

Alice lit her cigarette with the third match, clumsily, and said, "All the years I've worked for your family First your mother, then you."

"I don't know how you put up with us," said Suzanne "With me, especially Only now am I beginning to realize what an impossible creature I've been all this time. That's the trouble with being rich—it's a pretty inadequate training for being poor Why are you upset though, Alice? Not because I came out with a tasteless and rather disgusting anecdote over supper, surely."

"You take me so for granted," said Alice. "I don't know

where I go from here. You haven't given me one word of explanation about what's going to happen to me, what's going to happen to you, what's going to happen to the both of us. I'm frightened of the future, that's what I am—frightened."

"Alice, I can't help you," said Suzanne. "All of a sudden, I've become like almost every other woman of my age in this world, except that I was once an heiress, own a hollow title and have the loving services of a lady's maid whom I can't even afford to pay. I'm holding on to you with open hands, my dear. If you wanted to leave me, I wouldn't have the right to prevent you. As to the future—my future—I've shed everything that held me imprisoned in the past, and I'm really quite hopeful. I'm a Thursday's child, Alice, and we Thursday's kids have a long way to go."

The older woman, not making very good headway with her cigarette, stubbed it out. "Shall I be going with you?" she asked without looking up.

"For as long as you want to come, Alice," replied Suzanne.

The discussion ended there, and it was not till the middle of the night that Suzanne realized that there were other reasons, deeper and more complex, that motivated the maid's behavior. Some time after midnight, Alice crept into her young mistress's bed and snuggled up close to her: not, as in the past, to offer warmth and loving comfort, but to receive it. Her cheeks were wet with tears, her lips tremulous. Suzanne gladly gathered her close, laid her head between her own breasts, stroked her hair, murmured comfortable endearments, watched over her till she slept.

But not even sleep brought solace to the tormented creature; for in the dark hours, she had a nightmare that caused her to cry out in anguish, *"I didn't kill him! I didn't! It was an accident—an accident!"*

And later, toward dawn, there was a repetition of the trauma, when Alice struggled in her arms and, soaked in sweat, seemed to be trying to run away from something. And all the time protesting repeatedly, *"I did it for my darling's sake. It was for her that I killed him!"*

Two days later, the inspector called.

Alice, fortunately, was not in. Suzanne, who was working on a painting, answered the door. He was a shortish, red faced, solid looking man of about forty, dressed in a smart tweed suit. He announced himself as a police inspector named Brown and

produced a warrant card to establish his identity. He was calling, he told her, in connection with the death of one James Hemstock, who he understood had been known to her ladyship. With a calmness that astonished herself, Suzanne asked him in.

"Ah, I see you're into the painting lark," said the inspector, regarding the canvas upon which she had been working: a self-portrait from a reflection in a mirror set up before the easel—the last resort of a hard-up painter since Rembrandt's day and before. "I do a bit of it myself. Always send three pictures to the Royal Academy summer show every year. Never get accepted Living in hope How well did you know Hemstock, Lady Einskattle?"

"Not well," she parried, shifting her palette from one side of the painting table to the other to provide an occupation for her nervous hands. "Not really well at all."

"That's not to be wondered at, your ladyship," replied the other. "From all accounts, he was a fellow who had a bad reputation with women, if you follow my meaning."

"There's no need," said Suzanne, "to address me as 'your ladyship.'"

"Very well," responded Brown "So, back to Hemstock. You have heard that the coroner's inquest found the cause of death to be suicide while of unsound mind?"

"I hadn't, actually," replied Suzanne. "But I'm not surprised."

"No, I don't suppose you are," said the other "There was nothing to indicate otherwise And his father died under similar circumstances. Suicide's an inheritable tendency, so the psychologists say What they call 'familial.' And even the modus operandi, as we call it, was the same: self-inflicted shot with a sporting gun."

"Well, if everyone's agreed," said Suzanne, "I suppose the matter's closed. Yes?"

The inspector nodded vigorously "Oh, yes, yes. There's just one odd thing A little inconsistency has cropped up, and we wondered if you might be able to help us."

Suzanne put her hands behind her back so as not to reveal how they were trembling. What a devil of a thing it was, she thought, to have such revealing hands

"Yes?" she asked.

"It came up after the inquest and the coroner's verdict," said Brown "A purely routine report that had been overlooked

for some reason or other, but which someone at the local nick—that's our language for the local police station—happened to spot. They rang down to us and asked us to check it out. That's why I'm here."

Suzanne had the wild idea to offer him a drink but quenched the notion in time. "Do go on," she said calmly.

The inspector referred to a notebook. "It seems that you were picked up by a P.C. Maginnis one night because you'd forgotten to switch on your car lights. Do you recall the occasion?"

"Yes."

"Um—that would have been while your husband, the earl, was in hospital?"

"Yes. Shortly after he regained consciousness." She drove the fingernails of both hands into her palms brutally, till it hurt, to keep herself in check. It seemed to help.

"At—the time given is shortly before eight o'clock in the evening."

"That sounds about right."

"While on your way to visit the bailiff Hemstock. You were afterward observed entering the drive leading to Hemstock's residence." Inspector Brown met her gaze. She realized, with something of a physical shock, that it was the first time he had looked directly at her since his arrival. "Wasn't that, perhaps, a little unusual?"

"Unusual? Why?"

"So late in the evening for a lady to be visiting her husband's employee?"

"What are you implying, Inspector?" There seemed no point in evading the issue, since it was very clear what he was implying.

He was made of tough material and not easily put down. "What *should* I be implying, ma'am?" he countered. "Truth to tell, I'm not implying anything. I merely state that it might be thought a little unusual for a lady in your position to be visiting a man like Hemstock at such an hour." He could scarcely have been more blunt save directly accusing her of being a whore.

"I—I had matters to discuss with him," said Suzanne. And now she knew she must think quickly and speak carefully. "Matters relating to the running of the estate."

"That couldn't have been communicated by phone?"

"There was written material I had to pass over to him."

"Could you not have phoned him, instructing him to pick this material up at the castle?"

"I couldn't get through. Possibly his line was engaged. Anyhow, I had nothing to do, so I got the car out and popped over."

"You had that close an acquaintance with the running of the estate that you were able to issue written instructions to the bailiff? But, surely, you'd only been married to Lord Einskattle for a few weeks, and had lived at the castle less than half that time. Were you so well informed, in that short time, as to take over the direction of the estate from your injured husband at a moment's notice?"

"The—the instructions weren't mine."

"Ah!"

"They were—my husband's."

"When he'd only just recovered consciousness?"

A protracted volley, this, and game point.

"He wrote the instructions before his accident. I happened to come across them."

"I see."

The game had ended But at what cost to the winner?

The inspector had left her.

Little fool, you've dug your own grave and walked right into it! If only I had had time to dream up something more water-tight. And yet, come to think of it, one should have *realized* that this might happen. Now they would go back to Jock. In no time the phone or telex would be humming to Scotland, to the "local nick." A police car would soon be on its way to the castle, with someone to interview his lordship.

And Jock would deny all knowledge of the written instructions She knew that as certainly as she knew that tomorrow the sun would rise.

Suzanne wandered through the flat, irresolute, disoriented. In the bathroom, she gazed at her reflection in the mirror of the cabinet over the wash basin. She looked yellowish, distinctly peaky. Like a warmed-over corpse.

She snapped open the door of the cabinet Inside were the usual bottles of mouthwash, cough medicine, hair conditioner, eyewash, nail care and also a whole host of patent remedies for the minor ailments to which the flesh is heir, most of them belonging to Alice. Alice was halfway to being a hypochondriac.

And a bottle of sleeping capsules. She was also halfway to being an insomniac.

Suzanne took down the bottle and unscrewed the cap She trickled the two-colored, deadly little jujubes into the palm of her hand. Ten in all. What was a fatal dose? She looked at the printed instructions on the label: *"Take one on retiring. Caution, this drug is dangerous."*

Four? Six? The whole lot? But to take the whole lot might induce one's system to reject the massive dose What point in trying to commit suicide if one only ended up making oneself violently sick and ill?

Memories . . .

Memories of the night Daddy had had her dragged from bed, dressed in her fur-collared coat and woolly-lined boots and driven to the hospital behind the ambulance that bore her mother with siren screaming That was in Rome And they had had an apartment for the winter season in a palazzo that had once belonged to the Borgias. She was frightened, then, and had tried to seek out her father's hand for mutual comfort, but he had shaken her off.

The people at the hospital were very kind, the nurses particularly, and all of them were nuns They brought coffee and lots of assurances for the father and daughter in the dreary waiting room. She sat through the night with her silent father beside her, he hunched up and gazing unshiftingly at the far wall, where a crucifix and an oleograph representation of Our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane hung

They came near dawn and whispered to her father that he could see his wife now, she was out of danger We will look after the little girl while you see your wife, they said

Aram Garbisian rose, seized his child's hand firmly, brushed past the appalled nuns, and strode through the swing doors into the surgery where his wife lay half out of death

Suzanne remembered it in clear detail, like the hard, searching lines of an engraving: the shaded lights, the tilted operating table upon which lay her mother's nude form, still tanned from her summer in Corfu and her recent skiing in Kitzbuhel and lightly draped with a sheet that someone had thrown across her loins. Mummy with lolling head and rolling eyes, Mummy with a trickle of vomit at the corner of her mouth, with tubes all over the place, with the stench of vomit . .

"What the hell do you mean by bringing a child into here?"

The speaker, an American doctor, rather short and stout, with an angry, tired face. Angry and tired he had a right to be, having spent the livelong night in resuscitating a rich, idle woman who had decided that the world had done her ill.

"Dottore, this is the woman's daughter, and he her husband."

"Then he should be ashamed of himself, letting her daughter see her mother like this! He must be insane!"

Not so insane, Daddy. You knew what you were about You, who had seen beloved lives go cheaply, for sport. It was an act of support, against this moment, against the folly and futility, against the very sordidness of self destruction, that you took me in there that night and showed me what death and near-death were like, stripped of the allure.

She slipped the deadly little jujubes back into their bottle, screwed the cap back on, replaced the bottle in the cabinet, closed the door.

She worked on the self-portrait late that night, spurred on by the swiftly moving events of the day Shortly after the inspector left, Alice had returned. Alice, a little shamefaced, half-defiant, more than a little proud, announced that she had got herself a job in the servicing department of a supermarket and would henceforth be contributing to the upkeep of the establishment. They both cried for something like joy; embraced, opened a couple of bottles of Guinness and toasted each other. The champagne of more prosperous days had scarcely tasted better.

Just as they were sitting down to supper, the phone rang.

It was Inspector Brown . . .

"Sorry to bother you again, Lady Einskattle. That small inconsistency we discussed this afternoon it's been satisfactorily cleared up Yes, it's all right. His lordship recalls the occasion very well, how he had left written instructions for Hemstock immediately before his accident So sorry to have bothered you, your ladyship—tch! There I go again Thank you, ma'am."

Relief. Release . . .

In the artificial light, the color values changed, and she modulated her paint to match the shifting hues Now free—and thanks to Jock for supporting her in her impromptu lie about the "written instructions" to Hemstock. Had he, indeed,

written out such instructions before his accident, or had his injuries so clouded his brain that he thought he had, or—a long shot, this—was he deliberately covering up for her? Free, she painted with easy assurance, attempting things, nuances of style that might land her in trouble and ruin the whole work if they didn't come off, which is the only way to tackle a performance of art; in the way that a concert pianist, striking the first chord of a concerto, must accept the possibility of a pratfall from then on till the end, or how else will he lift himself from the common ruck of folk who can tinkle a tune for the amusement of their friends?

This was her life, this art of hers. And, surely, it must have been Mummy's. Behind the doubts and the subterfuges—Uncle Louis, the boy Aldo, the footmen, the window-cleaner, the long-distance lorry driver and all the rest—there must have been this constant consolation. In the end, Mummy had settled for Paris and the little hideaway in the rue de Bac, which had sufficed her till her death. Never after Mummy had started to live in the rue de Bac for a couple of months at a time had there been any trouble between herself and daddy. And from out of the rue de Bac had come good, solid canvases, steel-edged still lifes and street scenes worked up from drawings, no hint of eroticism, no longing for the evasive consolations of flesh.

Paris. The rue de Bac . . . .

The memory galvanized Suzanne into action. In the bureau drawer were the papers relating to her bankruptcy, stacks of lawyers' stuff interspersed with "schedules," which were long lists of things. On one of these schedules she remembered having seen the list of Garbisian real estate: the villa in Corfu, duplex apartment in Manhattan, the yacht, the aircraft, heavens knows what else, that had been disposed of.

But the walk-up flat in the rue de Bac? She didn't seem to remember having seen *that* in the schedule . . .

Hasty fingered, fumbling, Suzanne riffled through the reams of officialese till she came to the piece she sought.

It was all there: yes, the villa in Corfu and all the rest. Her glance spun down the long list of solid properties that her father had acquired in a working lifetime, right down to the ill-fated purchase of the Palazzo Sacco Fortis, his last acquisition.

But no mention of number 13 *bis*, rue de Bac.

Of course not: it was, she remembered, Mummy herself

who had bought the flat out of the proceeds of a successful exhibition of her works.

13 *bis*, rue de Bac was there, waiting for her. She even had the key: it had been found in Mummy's jewel case among the priceless assortment of diamonds, emeralds, pearls and the rest. Mummy's dearest possession.

It was then that Suzanne knew what she would do.

She would go to Paris and follow in her mother's footsteps

Chapter 2

The air was like a chilled Chablis or vanilla ice cream when she reached Paris. The very sky crackled with frost, and they were skating in the Bois de Boulogne. Suzanne left her baggage at the Gare du Nord and walked through the packed streets in the wintry afternoon, watching the lights going on, stringing the great boulevards like bright diamond necklaces.

She had been to the flat in the rue de Bac only once: that was when she broke her journey from Corfu with Alice just before Mummy's death. The memory was with her still, and she could have found her way there, climbed the stairs and opened the right door with her eyes shut.

It was nearly dark when she arrived. An old concierge gave her a searching glance from her window inside the archway leading into the courtyard.

Suzanne held up the key. *"L'appartement de Madame Garbisian."*

"Ah, oui. Continuez." Getting into number 13 *bis* was not in quite the same league as gate-crashing Buckingham Palace.

A hundred stairs up, surely. She quit counting at the third landing, and plenty more to go. The angle of the ancient staircase was at least five degrees out of true, which gave one the impression of scaling the lower slopes of an alpine peak. The view down the dark stairwell from the very top was not calculated to do anything for one's vertigo.

And there was the door. Mummy's door, the shield behind which Faye Garbisian had hid herself in what must have been the least unhappy years of her stormy marriage.

Inside smelled of must and ancient woodwork, like an old coffin maker's shop. A short, steep flight of rickety steps led

up under the eaves. There was a light switch and a bare electric bulb. Suzanne went on up.

Nothing had changed. There was Mummy's fine old easel: a museum piece that she had picked up in the flea market and that had quite likely been used by one of the great French masters. It still bore the scrapings from its last owner's palette, hard as jade to the touch.

The painting space had a north view over the rooftops and chimney pots. There was a sleeping and living space off it, containing a comfortable-looking bed, table, chairs and a deep leather armchair. Fitted cupboards held everything one could have desired in the way of crockery, glassware and cutlery. There was even a fridge. Suzanne plugged it in, switched it on and heard the small rumble of machinery. Beyond there was a small bathroom with a window that looked down into the street. That was all. That was it.

Home . . .

There was a gas fire that hissed and popped for five franc pieces in a meter. The warm glow quickly settled through the small apartment and entered the heart of Suzanne Einskattle, neé Garbisian, as she laid herself down upon her mother's bed and contemplated her present, her future, her immediate past.

The parting from Alice had been curiously painless. Alice had her new job, and a whole new horizon was opening up before her. The life of a higher servant to a family like the Garbisians had been superficially wide, but curiously restricted. It was Corfu one week and New York the next, but never a chance to ride on the top of a double-decker London bus, eat a sandwich in the park, suck an ice cream bar in a movie house and weep over a Bette Davis oldie. All these pleasant, commonplace things were now open to her. There was even a gentleman admirer. She introduced him to Suzanne as shyly as any teenage girl presenting her first date to her folks. He was a Mr. Albert Morley, undermanager of the supermarket where she now worked. Morley was about her age: nice looking, earnest, a divorcé. Suzanne asked her privately if his intentions were honorable; Alice said that she certainly hoped not!

Over the subject of her mistress's move to Paris, Alice wept. As she pointed out, she spoke not a word of French, was hardly likely to hold down a job there and could only be a burden to

Suzanne while she was finding her own feet in new surroundings. It was finally left that if and when Suzanne made a good living as a painter and moved on from the little flat in the rue de Bac, she would send for Alice to join her. Alice, if she were free and willing (if, for instance, Mr Albert Morley had not confounded all speculation and proved to have had honorable intentions after all), would hasten to do so.

The two women kissed to seal this makeshift bargain, although neither of them believed in her heart that it would ever come to pass.

Suzanne's last day in London was quite memorable, the way the hint of an old, loved tune can open floodgates of memory and warm the life like the slow blaze of a wood fire warms the hands.

In some of the mail redirected to her from Sloane Square there came an invitation from the Friends of the Royal Academy to a private viewing of a forthcoming exhibition of eighteenth-century French painting, one of the most comprehensive comings together of the genre in this century. Suzanne put on her smart, patched, expensive jeans, a cashmere sweater, a duffel coat and a beret and went.

There, in the echoing halls of Burlington House, she walked in wonder among the sad, tinkling glades of Watteau and drank in the last of the heady wine of Boucher and Fragonard, whose dreams of elegant dalliance were quenched forever by the fire of the Great Revolution. And then she met – of all people – her old lover, the model Freddie Hopwood.

And how was she? And how was he? They embraced fondly. He had heard of her troubles, of course, and commiserated – but not too much, or too earnestly. Freddie, of all people, had never given a damn about her being an heiress. To him she had always been a healthy, beautiful animal like himself. He broke through her news of going to Paris in the morning by telling her that he had parted from the airline pilot and was now being propositioned by a Royal Academician. If they were to have a natter about old times, it would be best if they snuck quietly away and found a cup of tea.

Over tea in a teashop, while devouring sticky cakes with no regard for his Grecian figure, Freddie told her the latest gossip from the College: how her late professor was having it off with just about everything that moved in the present year's intake, how he, Freddie, was posing as Mercury for a statue

to be put over a new post office building in Scunthorpe, or was it Widnes? And what was she, Suzanne, doing that night?

They went back to his place, calling at a delicatessen on the way. Freddie, as always, just didn't happen to have any cash on him, and Suzanne, as always, paid uncomplainingly. Supper in his little artisan's hovel in trendy Islington was classic kosher, prepared by Freddie with devastating expertise and served by him in a manner that would have put a West End maitre d' to shame. During dinner he told her that she was, if anything, more beautiful than when he had last made love to her. By dessert he had brought his chair round to sit beside her and traded spoonful for spoonful, with kisses in between. They drank lemon tea out of one beaker on the sofa before the fire, while he peeled off her sweater and bra and made tiny, intricate love bites around her nipples that promised to last for weeks.

All the long night they made love, resting only occasionally. He raised her up, in refinement and gentleness, to considerable heights.

In my end was my beginning, thought Suzanne, in her mother's old flat in the rue de Bac. Turn back the clock such a very few months and nothing has really altered, save that daddy has gone.

Next morning, Suzanne retrieved her baggage and bought some basic provisions, discovering her neighborhood shops on the way. She had an aperitif at a café on the corner and read the English-language newspapers. From the latter, she learned that the Earl of Einskattle had at last condescended to take his seat in the House of Lords, to which he was eligible by right of birth. The writer of the particular piece—it was the notorious Seymour Morell column of the *Courier*—snidely pointed out that his lordship's motives might not be unrelated to financial self-interest now that his heiress wife had turned out not to be an heiress after all, and that the House of Lords paid twenty-three pounds a day and expenses for all noble lords who traveled to attend, even if they went no nearer the debating chamber than the cocktail bar of the best club in London.

In the afternoon, she went to the pictures . . .

The film was Alastair Hudd's best-selling biography of newspaper tycoon and war hero Cy Delamere. It had premiered in Paris, with a gala performance before the President of the

Republic, the officers of the French Academy and members of the diplomatic corps. A week later, it was still playing to packed houses in the Champs Élysées. Suzanne had to stand on line for an hour to get in.

The guy playing Delamere was one of the handful of Hollywood stars who only have to condescend to participate in a movie to ensure a box office success. The production almost totally disregarded the text of the biography. Delamere, who had been born of quite well-off parentage in Chicago, metamorphosed as a barefoot country lad. The means by which, in his fledgling days as a cub reporter, he rose to the editorship of a local daily and eventually to the ownership of the group was straight out of *Citizen Kane*, his induction into the Air Force, brushes with brutal sergeants in boot camp, basic flying training climaxing in his first solo, took in the classic elements of *Beau Geste*, *Wings* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Suzanne came out of the cinema with the feeling of having attended the funeral of an acquaintance but realized that somewhere he must still be alive and kicking. She wondered what the real Cy Delamere had thought of the picture. Not a lot, she imagined, though it was already lined up for many awards.

Earning a living.

She painted every day: bread-and-butter stuff that she knew she could do well and quickly. She worked up a line of Paris street scenes from drawings, a few half-length nudes of herself in a mirror and two or three still lifes. She even had a shot at an abstract but painted it over. These, together with half a dozen small canvases that she had brought with her from London (the rest she had left in the care of Alice at St. George's Square), she carted by taxi to the nearest Left Bank picture gallery, where she was well-received, for the quality of the paintings was indisputable. But business is business, and the art market being overstocked as it was, in Paris as in London, Suzanne had to settle for no better than a fifty fifty deal on future sales, plus a framing fee and no advances. At the end of that morning, she had disposed of ten pictures on sale or return and was down 101 50 for the cab.

She skipped luncheon, settled for a coffee, counted the money remaining in her handbag and figured that she could last another two weeks, three weeks if she didn't eat.

* * *

"Do you have a five franc piece?"

The request came from a willowy girl framed in the doorway of the flat below hers. She was redheaded, freckled, healthy looking, right out of the chorus of a touring company of *Oklahoma!*

"Yes, I have—at least, I *think* I have." Suzanne delved into her handbag, rummaging.

"Oh, come on in, honey. It's too cold to stand out here. My name's Gertrude. Gertrude Myers. You English?"

"By adoption."

"Me, I'm from New Jersey. Let me fix you a drink. What'll you have? Did I get your name?"

"Suzanne Garbisian." For all practical purposes she had dropped Einskattle.

"That's Armenian."

"Right first time. Very good."

"Not really too clever. In this class I was in at school, we had three Garbisians, all Armenian. Garbisian is like being Smith or Jones in Armenia—right?"

"Right."

The girl was jiggling with bottles and glasses. Having extracted a five-franc piece from Suzanne and slotted it into the gas meter, she had the fire popping away happily.

"I build a mean dry Martini," she said. "Straight up and real dry. It's my only true accomplishment, and if you don't like it, that's too bad. Suit you?"

"That," said Suzanne, "is just what I need after this morning."

Gertrude Myers glanced at her sidelong in the act of wiping the slivered skin of a fresh lemon round the rim of a cocktail glass. "You don't say," she commented. "Tough going, mmm?"

"I'm a painter," said Suzanne.

"Say no more, say no more," responded the other. "By the way, declare me an iconoclast if you will, but I favor the lemon rather than the olive. If you disagree, all you have to do is throw it in my face. Here—try it."

Suzanne took a sip from the frosted glass and felt the chilled spirit shrivel her palate and set her taste buds aglitter. "Fabulous," she said. "God, but I needed this."

Gertrude Myers settled herself back in an armchair opposite the one that her new acquaintance occupied. She wore a jump suit in patterned silk and was barefoot. A slim gold chain banded her right ankle.

"Tell," she said.

Suzanne told her as much as she needed to know, omitting any direct reference to her father and husband but merely letting on that she was separated and pretty nearly broke

"But things might perk up," she concluded "Today, tomorrow, they might sell one of my pictures—or more."

"What kind of bread will this bring in, the sale of one picture?" asked her new friend.

"Average—about a hundred and fifty pounds. That's around fourteen, fifteen thousand francs," said Suzanne "Then the gallery takes a cut of fifty percent "

"Fifty percent?"

"And they charge the artist for the frame they put on it, which, since the frame is also added to the purchase price, is pure daylight robbery.",

"Let me get this straight," said Gertrude Myers. "The best thing that can happen to you, right now, is to sell a picture, out of which you stand to pick up around, ah, seventy-five English pounds, less the price of the frame Sister—you're in the wrong racket!"

Suzanne smiled. "Think so?"

"You'd do better peddling your ass in the Faubourg St. Honoré. Come to think of it, you'd even do better outside Montparnasse station!"

"It might come to it, at that," said Suzanne, and took a long sip of her Martini.

The other met her gaze Gravely She had very steady, candid green eyes. "Are you serious when you say that?" she asked.

"Not really."

"How far, in that line, would you go for money?"

"No distance at all Not for money Why do you ask?"

"I just have a thought," said the other "Let me pursue it, meanwhile replenishing your glass So—you wouldn't come across for money Would you sit around looking just plain goddamned beautiful for money? Big money "

"Who wouldn't?" replied Suzanne, amused. "Lead me to it "

Gertrude ("For Pete's sake never call me Gertie or Gert, or this beautiful friendship comes to an end as of that moment") worked as what she described as "a hostess" at a nightclub Nor was this *any* old nightclub, she hastened to explain The

Ninety-Eight catered only to millionaires and above, membership was by sponsorship and vote and the list of blackballed candidates read like Debrett, The Social Register and the Almanach de Gotha combined. They once threw out on his neck a desert prince who produced five million barrels of crude oil a month, she said.

The boss, a French count of impeccable lineage, one of whose ancestors had died in the arms of St. Louis on a crusade, was certain to like Suzanne and accept her as hostess. From then on, she simply wrote her own ticket.

"Not wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, Gertrude," said Suzanne, "nor do I aim the crack directly at you, but it does sound uncommonly like whoring."

"Not so," replied the other. "I tell you there are girls who work at the Ninety-Eight who send their kids to swell schools in Switzerland, run fancy sports cars and keep their husbands in idleness, yet never so much as dent their marriage vows. On the other hand," she conceded, "there are some whose right to membership in the League of Purity would be gravely in doubt. You may slot me in somewhere between the two."

They both laughed.

Yet another large Martini and Suzanne, who had kicked off her shoes and made herself thoroughly comfortable in Gertrude's sofa, was half inclined to give the Ninety-Eight Club a try. Her blandly cheerful new friend certainly looked none the worse for the rigors of her profession, and, if the furnishings of her apartment were anything to go by, profited greatly from it. The drinks tray stood upon an armoire, that, Suzanne having casually docketed it as being a good reproduction, turned out on closer inspection to be Louis Quinze of the sort that is seldom seen outside royal palaces and national museums. If halfway to being a whore, then Gertrude was a demiwhore of expensive and impeccable taste.

"I'll come!" declared Suzanne on an impulse.

"Great!" declared the other. "Tonight."

"*Tonight?* But, Gertrude, you've filled me up with Martinis. I'm half plastered!"

"We don't leave till eleven. Nothing gets started at the Ninety-Eight before midnight. Plenty of time to get in a little beauty sleep and sober up. Do you have anything to wear in the slinky line?"

"I brought so few things over from England. Only what I

could carry in a suitcase. A cocktail dress, a long frock. I wouldn't go so far as to label either of them as slinky."

"Let's see what we have here," said Gertrude. She slid open a fitted wardrobe that stretched from one end of the room to the other. In it, a veritable Aladdin's cave of finery shone out in all the colors of the rainbow and more muted tones. She snatched out a thing of fine Indian silk, delicate as thistledown, patterned in subtle deep greens and blues. "Try it for size, honey," she commanded.

Suzanne obeyed, stepping out of her jeans and sweater and slipping the long, caftanlike garment over her head. Once on her, its resemblance to a caftan ended: the neckline was perilously low, the pencil-slim skirt slashed recklessly up the back of the leg.

"Great!" declared Gertrude, giving the dress a hitch here, a tug there. "Of course, you won't be wearing pants and a bra under it, or the buttons and bows will show up like driving wheels on a Union Pacific Railroad locomotive. The same goes for your garter. Just roll your nylons above your knee."

Gertrude knocked at around ten thirty and Suzanne let her in. Her new friend squealed with delight to see the canvas upon which she was working: yet another half length nude of herself painted from life in the mirror.

"Hell, what a beautiful creature you are, Suzanne," said Gertrude. "And don't you know it?"

"I try to be objective," said Suzanne, frowning. "And only to draw and paint exactly what I see. Oh, God, that sounds even more conceited than ever."

"You're doing fine, honey. Real fine," said Gertrude, laying a reassuring hand upon her arm.

Gertrude's sports car, which sat outside the entrance to the apartment block, was bright red and had obviously been designed in a wind tunnel to cope with the crawling traffic jams of the peak Paris rush hour. At eleven o'clock the streets were nearly deserted, and a thin layer of frosty snow lay over all. Gertrude had scarcely gone through all the gears before they had crossed over the Seine and were cruising throatily to a halt in a quiet street behind the George V hotel.

"*Nous sommes ici*," declared Gertrude. "Concentrate upon looking beautiful, honey, and leave everything to me."

The entrance to the Ninety Eight Club was unannounced and distinctly seedy: a paint flecked door that Suzanne's guide

opened with a key. Beyond, in a narrow passageway, were parked a bicycle and three large, unemptied trash cans. And there was the door of an elevator.

Gertrude winked at Suzanne and pressed the button to summon the elevator. "It gets better as we go up, kiddo," she said with a note of high encouragement.

The rig was ancient and shuddered at every stage of their ascension to the uppermost floor Past each floor, Suzanne had opportunity, through the glass-topped doors, to see the kind of tenants who occupied the building: *Valjean et Cie, Merciers; Dr. Jules Parmentier, Chiropractice. Mme. Zaza Delibes, Clairvoyante.*

Arriving at last on the upper floor, they got out. But there was still farther to go. a single flight of concrete steps led up to a plain door with no handle, nothing but a small Judas window. They mounted the steps, and Gertrude tapped upon the door. It opened, but only a slender sliver, a chain still across it.

"Gertrude," she announced herself.

"Who is the woman with you?"

"Wants to be a hostess Will M le Comte see her?"

"We will inquire. *Entrez.*"

The chain was removed and they entered. Ahead lay a paneled corridor with a floor of polished parquet overlaid with a Persian runner. All about them lay the perfumed coolness of discreet air conditioning. They followed their guide, a tall creature dressed as an Egyptian, to a door at the far end. It appeared to be of beaten bronze and was guarded by two turbaned Nubians, black as coal, their naked torsos gleaming with oil and their loins girded with cloth of gold The bronze door opened of its own accord at their approach and they were admitted into a chamber the dimensions of which, because of the diffused lighting and the clever placing of mirrored walls and dividing columns, were difficult to determine From where Suzanne was standing, on a balcony looking down into the chamber, there appeared to be a hundred or so people present, male and female, grouped at small tables set in alcoves round the intricate space

"This way," said their guide.

Another door He tapped upon it and a voice bade them enter. Seated at a gilt and leather desk in the center of a spotlit room was the slight figure of a white haired man in a tuxedo. A monocle glittered in his right eye as he raised his head from a sheaf of papers before him to regard the newcomers.

"M. le Comte, Gertrude has brought this woman to be a hostess."

"Your name, ma'mselle? I require only your first name, and it may be any that you choose."

"My name is Suzanne, monsieur."

"Remove your coat, Suzanne."

She did as she was bidden, their guide taking the garment from her. She stood before the man with the monocle, whose steady gaze took in the lissome figure in the patterned Indian silk, lingering over the splendid structure of the bosom, the sweet fall of her hips, admiring the almond-shaped eyes, the careless splendor of the chignon into which she had gathered her locks.

"You are perfection, Suzanne," he murmured

"Thank you, monsieur."

"Go now. Gertrude will look after you. How you disport yourself, the arrangements, financial or otherwise, that you may make with any of my clientele, is your business. One word of complaint against you, however trivial, and you do not come here again. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, monsieur."

Gertrude gave her a slow, wandering tour of the club. Gertrude, who was stunningly attired in two pieces of shimmering silver cloth, a sleeveless bodice and wraparound skirt, received many greetings from the men and women who were grouped in the alcoves about shaded lights. Gertrude's costume, though mildly scandalous, was almost demure compared to those of some of the female clientele. The latter—almost invariably escorted—were quite easily distinguished from the hostesses because they were dripping with jewelry. There was a girl, a mere chit of a thing, by whose side sat the lead singer of an internationally famous rock group. Like her companion, she wore jeans, and with them a linen shirt open to the waist that revealed the nipples of her breasts at the slightest move. Her every finger was knuckle-dusted with diamonds and emeralds.

In the gaming rooms roulette, chemin de-fer, baccarat and craps were being played. Suzanne saw a swarthy sheik in a burnous scrawl a numeral on a page from a cheap notebook and drop it carelessly upon a single number of the roulette table. The number came up, the croupier taking note of the figure upon the paper, raked over to this sheik a pile of *plaques* that must have been enough to buy a cruiser, the latter shook

a languid hand and asked that the winnings be placed to his credit. By the roulette table also sat an obvious member of the clientele -a brunette of indeterminate years dressed in a tuxedo, with mannish coiffure and a long cigarette holder. She played every game with a thousand-franc *plaque*, *en pleine*, and consistently lost, all the time molding the soft flesh of the upper arm of an exquisite blonde hostess who sat by her side.

It was clear that the debauchery was of a very high order, unconcealed, unashamed The more sophisticated drugs were in evidence: the Sapphic beauty at the roulette table from time to time paused in her ministrations to the lovely creature beside her, took from a silver snuffbox a pinch of white powder and sniffed it with all the air of a Beau Brummell. The cloying scent of cannabis, mixed with jasmine and other flowers, hung over all.

"Mesdames, will you accompany me, please?" It was the man who had admitted them to the presence of M le Comte He guided them to a table near a minuscule dance floor, where two men rose at their approach. Brief introductions followed: Mesdames Gertrude and Suzanne; Messieurs B and R. They sat down, Suzanne next to R, who looked to be in his middle fifties, with the taut, bronzed skin and spare girth of a man who spends wisely and well upon himself. Although French, like his companion, he conversed easily in English and proceeded to tell Suzanne a most diverting true story that he had heard while being shaved at his barber's shop that morning. It concerned a fellow customer of the establishment, a retired professor of the Sorbonne and a man of fairly slender means, who booked a two-week holiday in Corsica with his wife, air fare and hotel thrown in. On the seventh day of the holiday, his wife fell ill and died. So there was this elderly gentleman of no great means, stuck in Corsica with a corpse in the height of a subtropical summer. What should he do? Suzanne confessed herself baffled Why, said her companion, it was quite simple, really. the professor donated his wife's corpse to the local teaching hospital for dissection in the cause of medical science and remained to take advantage of the last few days of the holiday. Furthermore, the travel agent granted him a rebate for the unexpired portion of the wife's holiday! An essay in the cool logic and unsentimental practicality of the French when it comes to money and means, submitted R with a laugh.

"Mesdames et messieurs, maintenant commence le spectacle . . ."

There was a dimming of the lights surrounding the small dance floor, while the floor itself, which was of glass, became brightly illuminated from below Set back from the floor, on a gilded balcony, a trio of Black musicians, piano, cello and flute, sketched in the opening bars of a sad air evocative of Debussy.

Suzanne's companion R was stridently addressing his friend B about the state of the Common Market and the perfidy of the British fishing policy when onto the floor stalked a trio of dancers: two male, one female. The latter was an ash blonde of Scandinavian appearance; her companions were both superb examples of diverse races, one of them a redheaded Caucasian, the other an African as black as ebony. All were dressed in costumes of a vaguely Eastern persuasion

While B and R droned on about the Common Market, there began upon the floor a protracted and convoluted dance in the classical tradition, with slight enlivenments at the close of each extended figure of the dance. The gentlemen of the ensemble removed one item after another of their fair partner's none-too-cumbersome attire: first a short bolero jacket, followed by a wraparound skirt, a chiffon sash that rendered her totally unencumbered. This nude Scandinavian, this startling Brunhild, then proceeded to attach herself, first to one, then the other, of her partners; insinuating her bare, lissome form against their muscular hardness, inviting -and receiving—the blessings of their mouths; while all the time divesting them as they had divested her no great task, since both men wore only baggy pantaloons and thin shirts The shirts she simply ripped from their backs . . .

B and R were now speculating about the eventual outcome in Southeast Asia Suzanne exchanged a glance with Gertrude, who simply shrugged her shoulders, took another sip of her champagne and readdressed her gaze to the spectacle on the dance floor.

The trio of musicians had switched to a livelier beat, and it was to this rhythm that the blonde and the redheaded Caucasian danced an evocation of pursuit, entrapment and fulfillment. Nor, was the dancing merely figurative, on the contrary, it was danced for real Her lips, her eyes, her hands urged her partner to achievement The final act was displayed, prone, upon the illuminated floor, with the African standing over them, arms folded And when the Caucasian rolled aside, satiated,

the blondé reached up, extended her hands to the massive, jet-black form looming above and drew him down to join her . . .

"That, in any event, is what I feel," pronounced R. "In my opinion, China will be the heir and successor to the countries of Southeast Asia, though we shall not see it in our lifetime." He turned to Suzanne, solicitous. "My dear," he said, "all this must be most boring for you. Shall we retire to the tables and win a few thousand before breakfast?"

The spectacle continued.

As it turned out, R not only won on the tables but won handsomely, though B was down a few thousand. Suzanne's partner deferred always to her, whispering for her to whisper the next number in his ear. He called her his genius, his inspiration, his guiding star. Toward dawn, they breakfasted off coffee and newly baked croissants. It was past seven o'clock when Suzanne and Gertrude parted company with their two cavaliers. R kissed her, insinuating a hand inside her coat and into the vestigial covering of her bosom. Well, so here we go, she thought; what's a squeeze of tit between friends? No such gesture was proffered. When she joined Gertrude in her scarlet deathtrap and rummaged into her cleavage, Suzanne took out a neatly folded wad of four 500-franc banknotes - roughly the proceeds she might expect from the sale of three pictures, less gallery charges.

"How'd you make out, honey?" asked Gertrude, throwing her roaring monster into gear and zooming down the gray, dawn-lit street.

"It's ridiculous, quite ridiculous," said Suzanne. "All this"—she showed Gertrude the notes—"simply for sitting around and being and looking oneself."

"The rich aren't like the rest of us," commented Gertrude.

And in that, Suzanne knew that her friend was wrong; for those who have been rich—*really* rich—knew that they were just like everyone else: given to disenchantment, to boredom, to discontent, to self-destruction in the pursuit of evasive happiness. The rich are *not* different, they are simply driven to pay more and more for an ever-descending spiral of diminishing returns.

The winter was short, with spring burgeoning to come through, with a new life pulsating to be born in the great city.

Suzanne was acutely aware of this, was conscious of being poised at the door of a rebirth, one life having ebbed away from her, another full life not yet having come. Meanwhile, it was quiet and pleasant to sit and contemplate, to count one's blessings and wait for the springtime.

The Left Bank gallery with which she had left her pictures on sale or return—Martin et fils, of the boulevard St. Germain—actually sold two of them in less than a week. There was, however, the gap of a month before they sold another.

She painted every day, rising at first light to make herself coffee and nibble at a croissant that she bought fresh from the *boulangerie* on the corner, then working through till lunchtime. She lunched off bread and cheese or bread and sausage with a piece of raw fruit or vegetable, drank mineral water and occasionally wine. In the evenings she went out to one or another of the café-restaurants that line the streets of the Left Bank, sometimes with Gertrude, sometimes alone. She was frequently accosted and propositioned, though never by the "regulars" of the arrondisement, who swiftly came to recognize her as a fellow local and furthermore—since she carried a sketchbook with her always and drew constantly—as an artist. She made a few friends and took over some of Gertrude's secondhand, but no lovers It was as if, she told herself frequently, she was *keeping* herself; though why, and for whom, she could not for the life of her explain. She went to parties, with and without Gertrude; mostly of the Bohemian kind, where painting, literature, politics and sexuality were the main topics. As a nonpolitical animal and a sensualist, Suzanne regarded the discussion of politics and sexuality as a waste of time. Of literature, she knew hardly anything worth a mention. She could—and did—chew the fat about painting the whole night through with anyone who knew what he was talking about.

On the outside edge of her life was the Ninety-Eight Club, which she attended one or, at the most, two nights a week, and purely for the money. With Monsieur R, with a certain Baron V, who was something high in the government, and with a Greek millionaire playboy, she imperceptibly slipped into the role of friend and confidante They made scarcely any demands upon her save that of requiring the company of a supremely beautiful and beautifully behaved woman When a man has done everything, been just about everywhere, drunk of youth and beauty to excess, he returns, in the end, to the civilized worship of good manners and female loveliness M. le Comte,

owner of the Ninety-Eight, was well aware of this principle. The bait—the explicit cabaret turns, the uninhibited drugging and the sexual display—was mere window dressing In the heart of the Ninety-Eight Club was the geisha principle: men who had every material advantage that power and money could provide were content to spend the night in company with their peers—and with a selection of the most beautiful women in Europe.

Flowers were sprinkling the borders of the Champs-Élysées and Suzanne had shed her winter coat when she received by messenger a most curious communication from the gallery of Martin et fils:

> *"Most important that you attend here sharply at noon to sign and date pictures for an important client. Jacques Martin, Principal."*

Suzanne was distinctly slapdash in signing her work, largely because, in the past, she had not been obliged to sell her pictures for a living, and also out of a sense of modesty. When she got around to it, she signed with the simple initials *S G.*, followed by the date That morning, obedient to the summons, she set out for the gallery in the boulevard St. Michel with her paint box tucked under her arm, a lightness in her step and the curious feeling that she was setting out for a date with destiny

One of her paintings, a half-nude of herself, dominated the main window of the gallery. She stopped and gazed at it critically for a few moments, decided it was halfway to being not too bad at all. A little too explicit in the coolness of the halftones, maybe; the hint of drapery in the background a trifle flashy and mannered in execution; but the drawing was good and solid, and she was never scared as in this case—to make a definite statement and stick with it.

She went in. M. Martin, the principal of the gallery, greeted her with considerably more than his customary warmth, relieved her of her paint box, helped her off with her leather jacket and gestured to the semicircle of framed pictures that stood on easels or were hung on the showroom walls, about fifteen in all.

"Et voila!" he declared *"Vous avez arrivée, mam'selle!"*

Stunned with surprise, Suzanne could only fall back on the vernacular. "Don't tell me, monsieur," she cried, "that you've sold the bloody lot!"

M. Martin spread his hands and hunched his shoulders in the classic Gallic gesture. "All!" he declared. "Every last one—including the one in the window."

"Well, good for you," said Suzanne. "Who's the buyer?"

"Not only that," said Martin, "but I am offering you a one-man show in the summer. Now—what do you think of that? Will you be able to assemble, say, twenty or twenty-five canvases by March first?"

"No problem," replied Suzanne with enthusiasm, "for I've got more than that in store in England. M. Martin, you really are a brick. I could kiss you." And she did.

"*Revenons à nos moutons, mam'selle,*" said the gallery owner, with reluctance detaching himself. "The buyer will be here any minute, and I have champagne on ice to celebrate the occasion. I beg you to occupy yourself by signing the pictures while I tend to the champagne. *A bientôt!*"

"You haven't told me who's bought the . . ." said Suzanne. But he had gone.

She opened her paint box and poured some turpentine into the dipper of her palette, then mixed a thin light tone of a neutral beige: light against dark, dark against light; it wasn't a job that would have taxed Michelangelo.

S.G., and the date . . .

And, for a change, *Suzanne Garbisian* and the date.

Why, oh why, did she feel this sudden lightness of heart?

It was because of the sun, which was shining most unseasonably in through the showroom window, she could feel its warmth upon her back. Its brightness was reflected from the varnished surface of the picture on which she was carefully lettering her name. And the sudden shadow that was cast over the picture—that would be caused by someone pausing outside the window, presumably to look at her picture, her self-nude. And taking quite a while over it.

She half turned in the act of picking up another brushload of paint from the palette and could see, from the corner of her eye, the looming form of a man. Instantly, her artist's sense of shape and proportion, of silhouette set in motion a recollection. It was a process that was completed before she even focused her gaze properly upon the man outside the window, and she experienced a prickling of the skin, a quickening of the heartbeat, a rush of adrenaline to the bloodstream before her eyes met those of Cy Delamere.

M. Martin came fussing up from the basement, bearing ice bucket and glasses. "Ah, monsieur has arrived," he declared. "and dead on time."

The doorbell tinkled, and then they were facing each other across the narrow showroom Suzanne distinctly felt the earth shift in orbit and heard a small bird high in the zenith singing his heart out for joy of awakening

"I think that I do not have to introduce madame and monsieur," said Martin.

Chapter 3

He took her to luncheon at Maxim's. There, under his gray-eyed gaze, she lost some of the assurance that she had managed to assemble in the gallery, when the champagne and the laughing exposure of the little subterfuge that he and M. Martin had cooked up between them had served to break the ice and provide running small talk. Yes, he had come across the picture in the window quite by accident, had recognized the sitter, and had made an intelligent guess that sitter and artist were the same. Then he went in and bought the lot.

All that was behind them. They now sat facing each other across a small table. Suzanne felt terribly vulnerable; she could not rid herself of the notion that her cheeks must be flushed, that she was altogether got up like a woman from the country selling eggs, with paint smears on her sleeve and a slight reek of turpentine on her fingertips that even Maxim's scented soap and toilet water could not obscure.

"The last time we met," he reminded her, "was at your Highland ball."

"I'm trying desperately hard to forget that night," she said. "My only consolation is that you left early."

He looked down at his hands. They were the strong, slim hands of a horseman, a concert pianist, an air pilot. "I have to tell you that Lady Felicity phoned me in Frankfurt with a complete account of the remainder of that night," he said. "Of course, she got it from her daughter, chapter and verse. Are you intending to divorce Einskattle?"

"Or he me," she replied. "It's very easy nowadays."

"That will take a little time," he said. "Three years and more. What shall you do till then?"

"Paint. Wait. Watch the time go by."

"Is that enough for you?"

She shrugged. "It's freedom. To me, freedom is a unique experience."

"You wouldn't want to sacrifice one bit of that freedom and independence — even symbolically?"

"I don't follow you."

"At the other side of the world," he said, "at a good anchorage in Tahiti, I have a schooner and a crew of Tahitian islanders, good fellows all. Today I have a yen to take a plane out of Paris and fly out there for the winter. Would you come with me? Now? Today?"

It was madness! A madness that could only be responded to in kind.

She frowned. "In such a hurry? I've got some things at the dry cleaners that won't be ready till Thursday."

"And I'm supposed to be entertaining the President of the French Republic at dinner tonight. But these things — dry cleaners and French presidents both — can be squared."

"I'll go," she said, "if we can leave now. Right now, before I have time to think, to change my mind."

He crumpled up his napkin and made to rise. "Right!"

"Wait," said Suzanne, "we've already ordered lunch."

"So we have, so we have."

"Does one ever — has it ever been known —"

"To duck out of Maxim's like this? There's always a first time."

He rose and seized her by the hand. "We can't take a chance on changing our minds. Come on — there's not a moment to be spared."

As they hurried out, they came upon the maitre d' leading a small cortege that included a trolley upon which reposed their lunch.

"Ah, M. Delamere!" exclaimed that worthy. "But you are not leaving?"

"Our thanks and condolences to the chef, Philippe, but it is a matter of life and death. Put it on my account. *Au revoir!*"

"This is madness," she said.

"But fun," he said. "And, considering the way I stood him up, exceedingly civil of the President to provide us with a police escort."

They drove to the airport through the chaos of the Paris evening rush hour unscathed, with police motorcycles up front

and the traffic ahead of them halted or diverted to clear their path. In the limousine behind was a whole wardrobe of tropical clothing that Delamere had insisted on buying her to replace the things unhappily left behind at the dry cleaners.

"I shall never need all that!" had been her cry

"You will. Washing facilities aboard the *Joseph Conrad* are a bit primitive We usually tow dirty linen behind on a line and let the Pacific clean it."

"So—what's the problem?"

"The sharks eat a fairly high percentage."

She had had time only to scribble a brief note to Gertrude:

Sorry, can't come tonight. Flying to Tahiti with a dreamboat of a man I've never been able to get out of my mind. Love to M. le Comte and everyone—S."

She watched him covertly. He sat at the other end of the wide seat, looking out into the gathering night, with the passing lights making interesting patterns on his bronzed, aquiline profile. She longed to reach out and touch his hand, or for him to make some show of communication with her, yet, conversely, she knew that there was no need for haste, that there was going to be all the time in the world. The only call for haste lay in catching the one and only plane that left for Tahiti every Tuesday evening.

"I saw the movie they did of you," she said

"Appalling, wasn't it?" he responded "Poor Alastair Hudd must have turned in his watery grave."

"Did you really carry on with that Eurasian girl in quite that abandoned manner?"

He grinned "No, she was written into the story to round out the general interest. I was sorry when I heard about your father, Suzanne " It was the first time he had addressed her directly by her given name.

"He was only a common little wog," she replied. "And a crook." Delamere was startled, and looked at her intently. "But sometimes I wake up in the morning with the realization that he's gone, and then I know that nothing will ever be quite the same for me again."

"You overheard that day, in Buckingham Palace gardens?" he asked.

"You and the Nielsen woman Yes And *she* knew I overheard."

"I thought so, from something she said afterward. No point in my apologizing now. You were nothing to me then. But I wish it hadn't happened and that you'd put it out of your mind."

"Do you see her often—Nadia Nielsen?" Awaiting the answer, she tried the trick of forcing her fingernails into her clenched palm, but it didn't seem to work as well as before, so he must have noticed her tenseness.

"I never did see her *often*," he replied, smiling broadly. "And considerably less than that now she's joined the opposition."

"What's the opposition?" asked Suzanne, with a new lightness in her heart.

"The Wessex-Seabright Group," he said. "I had her on contract as a free-lance consultant for a couple of years, and I must say that it worked pretty well. Nadia's a damned capable woman, and anyone in business who mistakenly thinks otherwise had better look out."

"Capable of anything, I should have thought," responded Suzanne. "And if that sounds catty, it's supposed to."

He laughed. "That is, in fact, quite a shrewd summation of the lady," he said. "When Wessex-Seabright offered her a place on their board and a lot else, it was an offer she couldn't refuse. It was also an offer that I couldn't match—at least, that's what I told her when she asked me. The truth is, I wouldn't want her on any board of mine. As we say in sailing circles, she steers a little too close to the wind on occasions."

"She dismissed my father as a crook," said Suzanne "It usually takes one to spot one."

Delamere made no reply. They had arrived at the airport, and it was clear that the VIP treatment accorded them at the instigation of the President of the French Republic had by no means ended. A high functionary of the airport and a bevy of acolytes greeted them as they alighted. They were ushered to a sumptuously appointed lounge that was reserved for visiting heads of state, emperors of international industry and the like. There they were offered champagne and ikra caviar, and Suzanne was presented with an exquisite Hermès scarf, a brooch, a flask of perfume and a selection of the latest glossy magazines to while away the tedium of the three-day flight to Papeete, Tahiti. The formalities of passport control were totally dispensed with in their case, their baggage loaded aboard the waiting DC-10. They were about to be escorted to the plane when Suzanne was made aware, by yet another incident, of

the power that her companion wielded—power of a sort that made her late father look like a small time entrepreneur. The phone rang. It was New York calling Mr. Delamere. Urgent.

"'Hold the aircraft!" went the cry

The aircraft was held. And for all of twenty-five minutes that scheduled flight lolled on the apron while Delamere bought a newspaper, sold two magazines and arranged for one of his New York secretaries to be given a handsome present on the occasion of her forthcoming marriage. They then joined the plane.

They dined over the mid Adriatic on more champagne and caviar, laughing and talking all the while And, somewhere just before Athens, Suzanne Emskattle, née Garbisian, knew for certain what she had suspected for quite a while and had had inklings of from the first moment of meeting him: she was in love with Cy Delamere.

The first-class cabin lights were dimmed Over the muted hum of the air conditioning could be heard the snoring of the Catholic bishop, who, together with an exceedingly handsome Creole couple, were the only passengers traveling deluxe with Suzanne and Delamere. Suzanne, in her window seat, could see, thirty thousand feet below and away to her left, the string of fairy lights that sketched in the line along the Yugoslav shoreline The naked eye could just discern small constellations of stars immediately below these were ships plying up and down the Adriatic.

She lay back in her seat and closed her eyes What a day it had been, and one that had begun like every other day in Paris with coffee, croissants and the newspaper, the tang of fresh paint and an unfinished picture on the easel beckoning her.

She had brought her paints with her, along with a sheaf of canvas boards and sketching papers The very sound of Tahiti and its associations with Gauguin colored the imagination and fired the blood Would this strange and unexpected odyssey extend her artistic awareness as it had Gauguin's?

Apart from whatever might emerge from her relationship with Cy Delamere . . .

She glanced toward him, reclining in his seat close to her hand, his head thrown back, eyes closed, mouth firm, chest

rising and falling evenly in his sleep. Who would have believed that an acquaintance that had begun so unpromisingly, that had not been tempered by subsequent familiarity (she hadn't even noticed if he took sugar and cream in his coffee!) could come to this.

She closed her eyes again, and drifted away. After a timeless void of sleep, she was awakened by a cry of terror.

"Watch your tail, Ted—look out! Oh, Christ!"

Her eyes snapped open.

Delamere was sitting half upright, his eyes still closed, hands stretched out before him and grasping the back of the empty seat in front, wrenching at it.

"Bail out, Ted! Eject! You're on fire!"

She reached out to touch him, to waken him from the horror of the nightmare through which he was passing; but remembering the old wives' adage about not waking a somnambulist lest his heart should fail and kill him on the awakening, she drew back her hand. Instead of shaking him, she slipped the hand about his shoulders and drew him gently to her.

He came readily, as a child to its mother's breast.

"Oh, Ted—Ted! Christ, why did it have to happen like that?"

His cheek against hers was wet with tears

"Hush!" she whispered to his ear. "It's all right. It's all over now. Don't fret any more."

The cabin hostess was peering through a curtain at the intersection, summoned by the sound The others were still asleep. Suzanne nodded reassurances to the girl that all was well; she nodded back, and withdrew.

"Why, oh, why, did it have to happen like that? . . ." No longer shouting aloud, he was moaning like a sick child.

She brought him closer till his head was upon her breast, till his questing, hungry arms stole about her for protection. And she held him tight, still sleeping as he was but growing calmer.

Outside, the Attic shore slipped past below, the wine-dark Aegean opening up beyond, source of her inspiration. And the god she held in her arms, a god no more but a mortal like the rest of us; no longer bound by power and wealth, no longer protected from the hurts of life by the ruthless force of mind; but naked, vulnerable and afraid.

So it was that, in that dark hour, with a strong man grown

vulnerable in her arms, Suzanne took the last step across the chasm that divides men and women. She had reached out and embraced the image of the whole man revealed to her with weaknesses and imperfections.

She loved—but was she loved in return?

Delamere was awake before she. He came back from the bathroom in a clean shirt, newly shaved and tangy with cologne, gently chiding her for being a lie-abed on such a grand morning, seemingly unaware of the previous night's happening. Suzanne had not the slightest intention of enlightening him.

He revealed as they moved ever more to the southeast and every fueling stop grew perceptively hotter and the landscape more wild and exotic that flying did not agree with him and that he would greatly prefer, given the time, to go everywhere by sea or rail. This aversion he attributed to his war service in the Air Force, which, as he told her, had gone on too long, eaten up too much of his spirit, blunted his enthusiasm for speed.

"Wait," he told her over breakfast, "till you feel the slow, deep roll of the Pacific combers and see *Joseph Conrad*'s stem bite deeply into the blueness and throw diamond sparklets high above your head. You'll never want to go any other way, Suzanne."

It was only the second time he had addressed her by her first name.

A strange man, she thought, to whom I seem to have given my heart. A mass of contradictions. He was taking her away on a mad, crazy jaunt to the South Seas (and even Daddy at his wildest would never have contemplated such a thing without weeks of planning), yet never by word or touch had he ever made the slightest sexual advance. But it was obvious from his manner that he liked her quite a lot.

Here's a man, too, who was a wartime pilot, yet he doesn't like flying. That was fairly understandable: the horrendous nightmare he lived through was obviously related to an actual experience of seeing one of his comrades shot down in flames. God—in flames!

Would she allude to the nightmare? Tell him what she had heard him cry out? She thought not. Not just yet, at any rate. Better by far to wait till he volunteered the information in his own good time, if he so wished.

There were nightmares of her own mind that she would not willingly bare to anyone.

She shuddered.

The remainder of the flight passed smoothly, and Delamere's sleep was not disturbed again by nightmares. Two days after leaving Paris, they changed planes at Nouméa in French New Caledonia for the last eight-and-a-half-hour hop across the coral-reefed archipelagos of the South Pacific to Tahiti. They took off in bright moonlight and shaped course due east. On this, their last night of the trip, there was a festive lightness between them. They toasted each other in Martinis and in champagne. The chief cabin steward, himself a Tahitian, presided over the serving of an exotic dinner of seafood from clams to sharks' fin soup, followed by pork ribs cooked with honey, sweet potatoes, bananas, breadfruit, pawpaw, pineapple seeped in liqueurs and more champagne.

By unspoken agreement, they never slept that night but sat together in the dim light of the cabin, with the great round tropical moon shining in, the wrinkled, dark sea below, and white surf describing the shape of the coral reefs in chalked lines about the passing islands. Suzanne told him something—but not all—of her childhood, of her mother, of the impossible life that her family circumstances had imposed on her, an only child, in the hothouse surroundings of the very rich. Delamere had little to contribute to her experience, having, as he told her, been brought up in a comfortable family circle and having achieved great wealth by hard work and by stages, so that he had never taken riches for granted.

"It must have been a traumatic experience for you," he said, "to suddenly go from having everything to having nothing."

"It was," replied Suzanne. "I think that, if you hadn't come along, bought all my pictures and whisked me away to the South Seas, I might quickly have drifted into whoring. Only of the most expensive kind, I hasten to add."

Keeping her fingers crossed and throwing her heart before her, she took the great plunge of telling him about the Ninety Eight Club, then sat back and waited for his reactions.

"Good for you," he said. "Particularly since, with your looks, you could easily have found yourself a sugar daddy to leech off. Personally, I think you've too much basic integrity for whoring, and I think you're just trying to shock me." He

glanced at her sidelong, quizzically, in the moonlight. "Are you?"

"Perhaps," she replied.

They fell silent for quite a while. And Suzanne suffered a tug-of-war between the relief of his accepting the fact of her working as hostess at the Ninety-Eight and a feeling of pique that he had not displayed the slightest jealousy. But, she rationalized eventually, all in all, the hurdle of the Ninety Eight had been got over without any hassle.

There were other facts of her life, other hurdles, that would not be so easy to negotiate — if it ever came to confessing them to him.

The tropical dawn came up out of the east in a flaming fan of iridescent golds, scarlets, vermilions and oranges. Descending, the plane circled the island of Tahiti and they saw it clearly, shaped like an hourglass with a narrow isthmus joining the two halves, each of which rose to wild and rugged mountains in their centers, lush palm groves lining the white-sanded shores of deep blue lagoons fringed by a barrier reef that circled the entire island, save for narrow gaps. It was through these passes that the fishing boats came, white sails shaking in the dawn light, shapely prows meeting the boisterous kisses of combers.

Still descending, they swept low over the mountain peaks, and Delamere pointed them out and named them for her. They swooped along a deeply cleft river valley, the steep sides fringed with palms, where a fisherman casting his nets, thigh-deep in the shallows, looked up and waved to the passing silver bird. A haze of whitewashed buildings, a perimeter fence, flashing runway, the howl of reversed engines — and the long odyssey was over.

"Out there," said Delamere, pointing to a forest of masts rising up out of the coral-enclosed harbor, "is the *Joseph Conrad.*"

A rattling taxi took them from the airport through the languid, sun dappled streets of Papeete, to a long quay where white schooners nosed against the shoreline like baby whales nuzzling their mothers. The *Joseph Conrad* was none of these, she lay out in the anchorage, which they reached in a whaleboat with an outboard driven by a grinning Tahitian.

The *Joseph Conrad* loomed large above them, two-masted, lean as a crane, bowsprit jutting like a spear, brown faces looking down.

"This is my skipper, Jean-Phillippe Vaihiria," said Delamere, introducing the crew when they reached the sanded white deck. "This is Auguste, his brother, who's the bosun. Also meet Kim Teputo, Big Sam and Jago Aimeo."

"Bonjour, mam'selle. Bonjour, patron. Comment allez-vous, hein?"

They crowded about the new arrivals, offering hands in greeting No fawning deference there, but frank appraisal and ready acceptance. Tahitians are tall and well-made, with hair that is mainly straight or gently waved; high-cheekboned, a trace of the epicanthic fold to their dark and lustrous eyes; broad chests and slender hips. To Suzanne, they stepped straight out of a Gauguin canvas.

"Come and see your quarters," said Delamere. "You must be tired after our all-night sit-up."

He led the way to the after part of the vessel, and down a short flight of steps into an airy, paneled compartment that he called "the saloon." Furnished in fine woods, with fittings of brass and copper, it was plain, austere and very masculine. Two doors led off from this main compartment.

"Here," said her guide, "is your suite."

It was comprised of a sleeping cabin with a wide, comfortable-looking bunk, a dressing table and mirror and two portholes through which the combination of sun and water reflected a shifting pattern of light and blueness upon the white-painted ceiling. Beyond, there was a neatly fitted bathroom and shower.

"Lovely," said Suzanne. "It's lovely."

"Is there anything you need?"

She shook her head. "Thank you No You've been so kind, Cy."

He leaned forward and, much to her surprise, planted a chaste kiss on her forehead "You're asleep on your feet," he declared. "Doctor Delamere prescribes about eight hours See you then."

He left her.

Alone, she stripped naked and took a shower, after which, scarcely troubling to dry herself, she laid a luxuriously thick bath towel upon the bunk and let herself flop down upon it like an empty sock. Still nude, she was asleep before she had time to turn her mind around a couple of times in her head.

In her dream, she was lying upon the surface of the sea, which was supporting her, arms outstretched, her fingertips

making the slight adjustments required to keep her balance, her careful breathing so regulated that her lungs always provided enough air for buoyancy. And then she metamorphosed into a sea bird circling high over a craggy rock set above a whispering ocean. The motion was exactly the same, save that instead of looking up at the sky, she was now looking down at the sea, and it was her wingtips, instead of her fingertips, that created the fine adjustments of balance.

The dream persisted. Sometimes in water, sometimes hovering in air, but always buoyed up by the element and gently pitched and swayed in its burden.

She awoke to find that the light from the portholes had shifted to the other side of the cabin and knew, by a quite strident dipping and rolling, and by the creak of cordage and thrumming of wind-blown canvas, that the *Joseph Conrad* was at sea.

Suzanne, dressed in a thin tee-shirt and jeans and barefoot, was soon on deck Delamere was standing at the stern by the wheel, which was being handled by skipper Jean-Phillippe With them, seated upon the taffrail and kicking their legs in enjoyment, were three bronzed girls Men and girls were naked to the waist.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Delamere "Have a beer " He handed her an opened can.

"This is wonderful," she replied, gesturing about her at the high sails, the slanting deck, white foam whipping past "How marvelous to wake and find we're at sea "

"It was a surprise for you," he explained "We slipped the buoy in midafternoon and are on our way to the lagoon at Faaa which is spelled with three *a*'s " He pointed off to their left, to the line of coral, a lagoon beyond and a fringe of palm trees in the distance, with blue shaded mountains as a backdrop "There's Faaa lagoon, we're heading for the entrance."

The three half-nude girls were chattering away together and eyeing Suzanne "The crew brought their girlfriends," said Delamere, gesturing.

"My brother, he bring the girls," interposed the skipper, grinning broadly "Auguste, he don't go far without him *vahine*."

"They're very lovely," said Suzanne

They were called Anne Marie, Helene and Zaza, but in no particular order. In style and beauty, they were practically

indistinguishable. Very Gauguinesque, and totally unself-conscious of their bare breasts.

"There's the passage ahead!" cried Delamere "See it, Suzanne?"

A cleft in the coral that seemed scarcely wide enough to take the big schooner opened to view. White breakers sluiced and boiled at each side of it; but the water in the passage was calm and rich blue, suggesting safe depths.

They were through the reef with yards to spare and slicing through the still surface of the lagoon, which, though deep, was as translucent as a looking glass A thousand small fish shifted course and darted away beneath the schooner's keel. Jean-Phillippe spun the wheel, and the sails shivered as the *Joseph Conrad* came up into the wind and stopped still in half her length. A harsh rattle of anchor chain and the schooner, no longer a bird skimming the surface of the sea, was joined with the land again.

"We swim!" cried Jean-Phillippe "Last one in, him no-good feller!"

Upon which the skipper divested himself of his pants and climbed to the capping of the gunwale, stood there for a breathless instant, naked as the day he was born, took a deep breath and plunged headfirst into the lagoon. Squealing with excitement, Anne-Marie, Hélène and Zaza hastened to follow suit; peeling off the patterned cottons that circled their shapely hips and mounting the gunwale like three sea nymphs. The rest of the crew came up on deck with yet another island girl All stripped and went over the side

Delamere glanced to Suzanne. "With that kind of example, we don't have much choice," he said "Coming?"

He was over the side, bare buttocks and all, while Suzanne was kicking off her jeans and pulling the tee-shirt over her head.

"Last one in, him no-good feller!" The cheerful taunt was delivered at her by skipper Jean-Phillippe from below, where he trod water and gazed up at her with undisguised admiration. Suzanne pertly thumbed her nose at him and dived

The water was like liquid air and close to the temperature of the body. The transition from one element to the other was so deceptively untrammeled that one might have been tempted to breathe and perish. The floor of the lagoon where the *Joseph Conrad* was anchored was as clear and smooth as a billiard

table: flat and unwrinkled sand with not a stone or a seashell to mar its perfection. Above she could see the underside of the schooner, her deep belly festooned with thin traceries of weeds that snaked and wavered in the underwater current, the umbilical cord of the anchor chain connecting her securely with the ground.

Suzanne broke surface, gulped in the blessed air and whipped the hair from her face. Jean-Phillippe and his brother and the other crewmen were sporting with the four girls, a process that seemed to call for a lot of grabbing and kissing.

No sign of Cy . . .

She dived deep, touched the bottom with her extended hands to check herself and looked about her. His solitary nude form was approaching her, chest almost brushing the sand, hair streaming behind him as in a high wind, legs kicking slowly and powerfully.

Suzanne waited for him to close on her; stood up, touching the floor of the lagoon with one toe to steady herself against the current, raised her hands to free her hair and let it trail in abandonment; consciously triumphant of her radiant nudity, her animal attraction for the male she had chosen for herself alone.

His leading hand came out and imprisoned her slender middle, the other closed about the back of her head and brought her mouth against his. They met, body to body, mouth to mouth, and he drew her intimately close, so that she could feel his heart pulsating against the peak of her breast and his manhood stir between her loins. Breathless, severed from the world of air and sky, they joined as lovers for a brief moment of eternal ecstasy, while all creation went on its way, unregarded.

But not entirely unregarded . . .

She saw the instant alarm spark in his eyes as he stared over her shoulder. Next he was thrusting her behind him.

She recovered her balance, made a gliding turn to see what he was doing—and perceived the menace that he had spotted.

It came from the direction of the coral reef, from the deep passage. It came more like a big cat than an underwater predator: sawing its great head from side to side, lashing its slender tail in excitement and fury. The blind-looking black round eyes were fixed upon the figure of the man that was advancing toward it, barring its path to the woman beyond. It was some kind of shark—a six-footer.

Don't sacrifice yourself for me—I'm not worth it! Surely

her anguished message would reach him through the dense element that separated them. If it did, he paid no heed but continued to advance toward the oncoming predator, standing nearly upright, driving himself along by stabbing at the bottom with his feet. It was this process—by which he sent up clouds of loose sand, like a dust storm—that commended him to his next move.

The shark continued to advance, but more slowly; and with one angry lash of its tail, turned its straight course into a parabola that would bring it behind its intended prey. Delamere matched this move by turning with his enemy to retain the brute's interest upon him. He was acutely aware of the fact that Suzanne, far from clawing her way to the surface and safety, was watching, wide-eyed, from quite near at hand.

A soundless scream burst in Suzanne's head as the shark drove forward, jaws agape, half turning on its side to slice through the body of its prey. In that same instant, Delamere kicked with both feet, sending a blinding sand cloud swirling head-high from the floor of the lagoon, shielding themselves from the killer's view Turning, he pointed urgently to the surface and together, he and Suzanne kicked their way to safety Eager hands reached down to take them and they were dragged aboard, panting and coughing salt water from their lungs

"There he go!" The men were pointing to an evil dorsal fin that was slicing down the side of the schooner, close.

The others had spotted the shark's fin coming in through the lagoon entrance and had cleared the water smartly only to find to their horror that two of their number were still submerged The incident ended as such tense affairs usually do, with the release of nervous laughter, lighting of cigarettes, calls for drink, heartfelt relief.

Suzanne's eyes were upon Delamere, as his were upon hers, and their fingers touched, briefly, when he handed her a glass of chilled wine.

It came to her that she might well outlive the memory of the shark attack and how he had unhesitatingly laid his life on the line to protect her, but that instant of ecstasy when they were briefly joined on the bed of the lagoon would live in her heart and in her mind till eternity

The tropical night descended swiftly blues turning to purples and fugitive grays, the western horizon blood red and

orange. They piled into the ship's whaleboat and the crewmen rowed them across the lagoon to the white-sanded shoreline. As they plied their oars, they chanted the ancient songs of their people handed down by word of mouth from the far-off unrecorded days when their forebears had navigated their frail craft across uncharted leagues of Polynesia to make their homes in Tahiti and her sister islands. Presently, the keel grated upon the sand. The men leaped ashore and dragged the craft high onto the beach, turned it on its side to provide a shelter and proceeded to build a fire out of the driftwood that lay in abundance at the tide line.

The girls had brought food. fresh fish, crab, mussels and clams, together with bowls of rice and prepared vegetables, all garnished with brightly hued spices and decorated with flower petals. These they laid out before the campfire on a coconut-leaf matting that served as a table, each dish on its own deep-green hibiscus leaf. And there, in the rosy, shifting light of the campfire, they feasted and drank till the great Polynesian moon rose above Le Diademe and cast long shadows of palm trees across the white sand.

Since the shark incident, Suzanne and Delamere had exchanged not a word, only looks. To her, it seemed curiously proper, almost as if the intrusion of mere talk would lessen the potent spell that had been woven between them on the bed of the lagoon Some time soon, tonight, early or late, he will come to me, she thought. Later still, words will be spoken. There's no hurry I've waited so long, it seems that all my life has been in preparation for this hour So she ate and sipped her wine and watched him across the firelight, smiling back at him when their glances met.

Giggling artlessly among themselves, the girls had presented her with a long strip of exotically patterned cotton and had shown her how to wind it about the body and tie it either modestly above the bosom or immodestly about the hips Like them, she was wearing this vestigial costume—tied above her bosom—and nothing else, it was heavenly to feel the balmy night air upon her bare shoulders and arms Cy Delamere wore a similar garment wrapped about his waist Across the shimmering flames of the campfire, he looked like some dark spirit of the forest: saturnine, watchful, mysterious in repose Suzanne discovered—to her dismay—that her whole body seemed to be outlined in bared nerve endings that must surely be visible

to the man opposite her, and that every inch of her body ached and yearned for him.

She took another sip of her wine . . .

Jean-Phillippe's brother Auguste had brought with him a small drum. Laying aside his drink, he began to tap out a complicated, double-double rhythm with his fingertips, gradually increasing in tempo and volume, till one of the girls sprang to her feet and went to the open space that lay between the campfire and the upturned whaleboat. Amid murmurs of appreciation from the menfolk, she unwrapped her sarong and knotted it at the hip. With liquid movements of arms and hips, she began to sketch out a visual pattern of the drum rhythm, arms and hips moving in tempo, her firm young breasts jouncing in counterpoint. The breathtaking loveliness of the movements inspired another girl to join her, similarly baring the upper part of her torso. Side by side, their movements echoing yet not matched, sinuous as liquid air, they followed Auguste's ever quickening, ever more frenzied tempo. The men began to clap on the offbeat and called to the remaining girls to join in the dance, which they did. Dry-mouthed with a strange yearning, Suzanne watched the quartette of inexpressibly beautiful creatures swaying before her in the firelight, by now lost to their surroundings and responding only to the memories of the ancient, pagan culture that was born in their blood, shaped through the long ages of the Polynesian people

And now the men were joining them on the sandy floor, their movements were stiffer, masculine, cocky. They each chose a partner and circled her, stamping their bare feet, jiggling their shoulders, exhibiting their fine, bronzed, muscular bodies The girls brought a new sinuousness, a serpentine quality to their dance; an enticing, seductive, inviting and entirely fresh overtone to their movements.

The tempo slackened to meet the mood now it had a languorous beat that pulsated in the ear and quickened the breath. Suzanne, driven by a compulsion thst she could no more resist than cease to breathe, found herself rising to her feet, fingers seeking out the knot that held her single garment tied above her breasts.

And then she was advancing into the group by the campfire, knotting the sarong at her hips as she went, advancing first one hip then the other, turning her bare feet with every step, as she had seen the island girls do; making liquid motions with her

hands and arms, feeling her naked breasts move in counterpoint.

Through the flame and smoke of the campfire, she saw *him* rising to join her; saw all the mystery of life unfold as he drew close to her. Nevertheless, his movements were slow, hesitant. the movements of a man who is uncertain of his steps. Suzanne, inspired, circled him, arms raised, hands sweeping her sable hair in a crown upon her head, hips swaying, breasts jouncing. He followed her every movement with adoring eyes; reached out to take her round the waist, but, coquettishly—as the Tahitian girls did when their partners importuned too boldly—she moved beyond his grasp with a mere turn of the hips.

The drumming continued, but quieter now; till presently, pair by pair, the dancers slipped out of the firelight and into the moon-cast shadows beyond, under the towering palms, till only Suzanne and Delamere remained on the dance floor of trampled white sand. Finally she relinquished herself to the arms that gathered her up and bore her out of the firelight.

Jean Phillippe, head bowed over his instrument, continued to tap out a sad, quiet rhythm in the night; alone now, for there was no girl for him.

There was a rock pool close by the shore, the water in it clear as crystal in the moonlight. Their two shadows were cast upon the time-smoothed floor of the pool

He freed her of her sarong and himself of his, then picked her up in his arms and carried her knee-deep into the warm water, where he laid her down Their lips joined in an eternity of night, stars and moonlight as he bore her through time and infinite distance, beyond charted space, to outer galaxies known only by the places they had occupied millions of eons before.

And still he bore her on.

The climax of her passion, when it came, was shared by his, both of them aware that the shattering end of their mutual orgasm—when mind and body screamed out for the agony and ecstasy to cease, yet to be protracted forever—was the extreme end of the created universe.

He had guided her to the very mystery of life and shown her the shape of infinity.

"I never saw so many stars I never knew so many stars existed."

"They've always been there," he replied. "It's just that one never takes time off to look for very long."

Satiated, serene, they lay side by side in the warm sand, with the balmy night wind rustling the treetops above their heads and the stars of the Milky Way spread out across the sky. Her head was pillowed against his shoulder, his arms were looped about her waist.

She kissed his breast; trailed the tip of her tongue from nipple to nipple, tasting the tang of salt upon the firm skin.

"I think I must have loved you from the first," she said. "At least, I was greatly attracted to you, you with your gruesome girlfriend."

"Nadia was never a girlfriend of mine."

"Liar. Did you never sleep with her?"

"Never."

"Cross your heart and hope to die."

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

She gave a happy sigh, relaxed back upon his shoulder "I bet it wasn't for want of her trying."

"That may be," he replied.

"Were you attracted to me from the first, Cy? Don't lie."

"You wouldn't believe if I told you. You'd only think I was sweet-talking you."

"Try me."

"When I got back to my office that evening, after the Buck House garden party gig, I acted in the typical way that men of my sort—men with the power and money to wield—frequently act when they have been attracted by some young woman at a party. I had my secretary dig out all the information she could get on you and then sort out a few dates in the not too distant future when I could ring you and offer luncheon or dinner."

"You did that—how nice. And how very condescending of you, Cy! I hate you!"

"However, my play for your attentions was neatly trumped before I had time to lay down my ace—with the announcement of your imminent wedding to Einskattle."

"Whereupon you were totally consumed with jealousy! Oh, tell me you were jealous, Cy."

"I shrugged the whole thing off completely," he replied. "For all of one afternoon That evening, I went out and got rather drunk. The next day, I told the office to go to hell and flew out to Florida for some fishing The fishing quickly palled

On the day you were married, I got stinking in Key Biscayne with a certain character I know there "

"And the wedding present—the books by the gruesome Nadia—you sent them out of—"

"Pique!" He supplied her with the word. "Sheer, downright, sulky, little-schoolboy pique. How d'you like that?"

"I love you!" she cried. "I've always wanted to be loved by a jealous, vulnerable man who'd have tantrums over me!"

They kissed one another fervently and when they had finished, she closed her eyes, breathless, and drew his cheek against her breast.

"And then you gate-crashed that appalling party at the castle," she said. "How did *that* come to happen?"

"How did that come to happen?" he repeated. "Why, my darling, I fixed it to happen."

"But how?"

"McWhirter is a shareholder in one of my companies. I read about your forthcoming ball in a society glossy, and, figuring it was the only way of seeing you again for heaven knows how long, I phoned him and suggested it might be to our mutual advantage for him to get invited. Which he did. I then got *myself* invited to his place that weekend. The rest you know."

"You did that?"

"That's right."

"Cy, you came all the way up to Scotland just to see me, and for so short a time?"

She leaped to her feet, and danced about the rock pool in the moonlight, laughing, pirouetting with impish delight.

"He truly loves me!" she sang "For love of me, for a mere glimpse of me, he went all the way to Scotland, and, what's more, *he suffered a weekend with the appalling McWhirters for my sake!*"

She collapsed, breathless, in his waiting arms, and they laughed together, mouth to mouth, teasingly, as lovers will; till passion asserted itself over high good humor. Afterward, she lay back in the sand and, twirling a lock of his hair between her fingers, asked him, "It's nearly dawn, Cy. Tomorrow is already today. What are we going to do today, my love?"

"Today," he said, "we take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea!"

Not the uttermost parts, but the *Joseph Conrad*, in the idyllic weeks that followed, traced a wandering path through the string

of bright pearls littering that part of Polynesia called the Society Islands, of which Tahiti is the jewel of the Windward group. From Faaa lagoon the schooner shaped a northwesterly course toward the island of Moorea, which rose from the glassy sea on the horizon, with awesome peaks about which rain clouds nuzzled. It rained on the passage to Moorea, and their sarongs they discarded as sodden and useless, going nude and shameless, men and girls both, on the upper deck. The sudden rain ceased as abruptly as it had begun, the illimitable blue sky poured sunshine down upon the schooner's wet timbers, causing them to steam, along with the soaked clothing that hung from the guardrails.

They dropped anchor in Cook's Bay, Moorea, but, finding it packed with tourist vessels and interisland schooners, found shelter in a lonely lagoon to the north of the island, where, as the anchor kissed the surface and descended, they could hear the distant throbbing of drums from a village that revealed itself as a cluster of pinpointed lights high above on the wooded slopes of the mountainside

They had supper on deck that night, under the awning of the sails, and the girls danced to the rhythm of Jean Phillippe's drum, as they had danced at Faaa, but, somehow, as it so often goes, the occasion did not match that of the previous night, and the company grew dispirited and drifted off to various parts of the vessel. Suzanne and Delamere were left to themselves. And distinguished themselves by having the first quarrel of their love affair.

It began with a simple question from her. "Cy, who looks after things at the office when you're away?"

He laughed shortly, picked up a crab claw from the detritus of supper laid before them, broke it and nibbled on the succulent flesh. "Good question," he said. "I suppose things go on of their own volition, like perpetual motion, save that one — that means I—gives the wheel a shove every once in a while. What I mean is: if I could get near a radio or a phone tonight—which I don't want to do, no way at all! I could put through a call with a string of instructions to buy, sell, asset-strip, liquidate, and take over that would keep my little gnomes in New York, London, Paris and where-have-you busy till next Christmas. As it is, those with authority, the ones to whom I delegate, can themselves initiate things on those levels very nicely. That's the secret: delegate, delegate, delegate."

He threw the crab shell over the side, where it landed in a

swirl of fluorescence as a school of small fish assaulted it.

"But," she said, "don't you ever *worry* about your work while you're away like this? All that money, all that power, being manipulated by other people?"

"I choose my people," he replied, taking a half pawpaw and closing his very white teeth upon it. "F'rinstance, my lawyer, Timmy Avery, could very well run things without my doing any more than popping in on quarter-days to sign a few papers and putting in an appearance at the annual general meeting. You shall meet Timmy. Dour old stick, but you'll like him."

"Daddy never could have lived like that," said Suzanne, remembering much. "He went nowhere, did nothing without an army of stooges at his beck and call to phone, telex, radio this and that. He would get up from table even when a guest of really influential people—people he wouldn't wish to offend—and dash off to make a phone call to his office. As for breaking important engagements" *like coming to see your daughter receive a prize, Daddy!*—"he was a master at it."

"As well he might have been," said Delamere. He laughed shortly. "I wonder he ever stopped running."

Stung by the inflection in his laugh, by the tone of his remark, Suzanne retorted, "Just what do you mean by that, Cy?"

"I mean, darling, that your father ran a very different operation from mine."

"You mean he was a crook, in the phrase of your non-girlfriend Nadia Nielsen! Go on, say it!" She drew away from him, hitched up the neckline of her sarong a little higher and glared at him.

"Darling, darling"—he reached out his hand to her, but she drew even farther away—"let's not quarrel over spilt milk."

"The milk having been spilt," she retorted savagely, "let us lick it up, every drop! You taunt me that my father was a crook—you, who used to employ the Nielsen woman as a consultant, who by your own admission you wouldn't have on your board at any price."

"Nadia's different, for God's sake."

"Different from my father, you mean? How so different?"

"She plays rough in business, yes. But she sticks to the basic ground rules, whereas—oh, let's forget it."

"Whereas what? You were going to make a comparison—no doubt odious—between that cow and my father. Spit it out!"

"Suzanne, Suzanne. Not to speak ill of the dead, but even your old man's stooges, like that shyster lawyer—what was his name? Jacques? Even *they* collected five years apiece at the Old Bailey."

There was no stopping it. His every attempt was like pouring on petrol to put out a fire, in the face of a comparison between Nadia Nielsen and her father, she would not yield an inch.

In their tropical heaven, they went on and on, till she was reduced to tears and he, his patience exhausted, flung off and left her.

He came to her in the night: slipped under the single sheet that covered her naked body and wrapped an arm about her, nuzzled his cheek against hers and found it damp with new tears.

"Sorry," he said.

"It was my fault."

"My big mouth," he said.

"My defense system. We're all alike, we Armenians. It's a reflex. Daddy had it in spades. But he had an excuse—I don't. I'm just a spoiled bitch who's never come to accept that people can love her for her own sake. Ergo, she looks every gift horse in the mouth, takes every relationship to pieces and tests it to destruction." She pressed herself against him. "Stop me, Cy!" she cried. "Stop me, or I'll destroy us both!"

"Yes, yes."

He kissed her eyes, her cheek, her brow; met her eager, questing mouth with his, grew ever more explicit in his comfortable ministrations; till she was at length being gathered up again in the breathless journey to the outer galaxies, where there are no shadows of doubt, no repinings, no second thoughts.

Next morning, a stiff breeze blew from the southeast, threatening more rain and possibly storms, so they stayed put in their snug anchorage for a week while the bad weather blew itself out. A couple of the crewmen took a boat ashore, braved the stiff climb to the village and came back with provisions: fruit, vegetables, coconuts—and a live suckling pig for slaughter. Suzanne, who would not hear of the little creature being killed aboard the *Joseph Conrad*, tied a ribbon about its fat, wrinkled neck and named it Claude. They sailed that night for the island of Huahine, a hundred and sixty kilometers to the west.

The crew was divided into three watches for duties on deck—

that is to say, manning the steering wheel and tending the sails Toward midnight, they passed the lights of an island on their starboard side. Suzanne was on deck with Delamere, who was on the wheel.

"Tetiaroa," said he, pointing. "It's made up of thirteen islets inside a coral atoll, and no access by ship, only by plane or canoe. The ancient summer palace of the Tahitian kings is there and owned now by — would you guess? –Marlon Brando It's a small world."

Huahine was relatively unspoiled by tourism, with beaches of the sheerest white sand and proud people who walked like kings, a seat of the ancient Polynesian religion Cy Delamere and Suzanne went ashore there to the capital city, called Fare nui-atea, and purchased provisions, fresh and dried, to last at least a month These were brought out to the schooner by the ships' chandlers' boat that evening, and it was noticed that one of the *Joseph Conrad*'s crewmen Kim Teputo hid himself below deck when he saw the arrival of the provision boat and showed himself again only when it had departed

His fellow crewmen and the girls joshed him about the incident.

"*Alors*, there's a certain vahine on Huahine, and I do not wish her to know I am here." sulkily explained Kim Teputo.

'*Mais*, she will be delighted to see you, Kim," they told him.

"She –*and* the twins!"

From Huahine, they sailed in light airs to the islands of Raiatea and Tahaa, which lie within the same lagoon. The vagaries of the wind made this, a relatively short hop, one of the longest passages of the voyage, as they tacked and wore about on every shifting breeze, frequently lying still in the glassy calm for days on end Under the tropic sun, cooled by buckets of water that they hauled up from the sea and threw over themselves, the crew lay about the deck, nude, somnolent

"Tell me again about your divorce," said Cy Delamere.

They lay side by side up in the bow of the schooner, in the shade of the great foresail that flapped impotently in the fickle airs.

"About two years from now, either Jock or I will petition for divorce," she replied 'It will be three years before the decree comes through and I'm free '

"And then you'll marry me."

She looked straight at him. "Is that a statement of fact, a rhetorical question —or merely a takeover bid?" she asked.

He reached across and touched her cheek; trailed his finger down her neck, across her shoulder and breast to the peak of a nipple. "It's a proposal," he said.

"Oh, my love—I thought you'd never ask "

Their mouths met in passion. "Take me down to the cabin and make love to me," she whispered

"Yes, yes, but first—the announcement!"

He leaped to his feet and called out to the crewmen and girls who were lying out on the deck, mostly in pairs, mostly entwined.

"Listen, all of you!" he cried. "My vahine here has promised to marry me just as soon as she's rid of her present husband. Now, what do you think of that?"

Any joining of two persons, to a Tahitian, calls for drink, dance and merriment—whether the joining has the implied permanence of marriage or is only a temporary arrangement. Suzanne was kissed by both crewmen and girls, and in the process quite unashamedly fondled by the former Champagne was brought up from the icebox, Auguste thrummed his drum and the dance began.

Cy filled two glasses from a foaming bottle and handed one to Suzanne.

"Here's to you, darling," he said "Here's to the future Mrs Cy Delamere."

"And to you, darling," she said "I've got to admit that when I've dreamed of this moment—and I've dreamed of it often—I never thought the both of us would be stark naked, and in public!"

Raiatea and Tahaa lay behind and Bora Bora was a single, long-extinct volcano peak rising out of the blindingly blue sea, with a line of white breakers to mark its reef. Always avoiding tourists, they anchored in a remote corner of the breathtakingly beautiful lagoon where they could bathe undisturbed. Complete nudity, save at mealtimes, was by now the accepted mode; Suzanne was tanned a golden brown from head to toes, with not a mark of a costume upon her skin. Unless it was raining - and rain showers are frequent in the South Pacific during the hot season —meals were taken on deck, squatting around a

coconut leaf table, and every meal ended with an impromptu dance.

The sexual mores of their Polynesian companions intrigued Suzanne. With the ratio of four females to five male crewmen, there was always one man without a partner The issue was very simply solved. the nine of them played a complex game of musical chairs, whereby partners were changed quite frequently, sometimes more than once a day. Kissing and the rubbing of noses, the touching of breasts and private parts they held to be as normal as shaking hands; but if a couple was seized with the notion to make love, they simply left the company, hand in hand, and went to a private spot below deck, or swam ashore together and slaked their young passions in the sun-warmed, white sand, for, though their love play was explicit and unconcealed, the act itself, following some taboo long lost in the unrecorded history of their people, was always performed in modest privacy.

Suzanne and Cy, considerate of their companions' feelings, conformed to their customs in this respect He had long since abandoned his own cabin and moved into hers, which they had named *"La Petite Chambrette d'Amour,"* and to which they always repaired when the need came upon them, during the day, to enjoy each other's delights in the privacy that island custom—and Westerners' inhibitions —demanded.

As she remarked to Cy, much to his amusement, she had no objection to the crewmen kissing her and rubbing noses when they greeted her in the morning, but it seemed a little hard to have to put up with her tits being squeezed and her bare ass being patted in the bargain'

On one occasion only did Suzanne and her lover depart from the taboo, and that was during the passage from Bora Bora to Maupiti, which is the most westerly of the Society Islands and represented the turning point of the *Joseph Conrad*'s odyssey Once again the schooner ran into calms, when the sails hung like dry washing on a line and the motionless air lay heavily about the vessel, rendering the lower deck as uninhabitable as the inside of an oven.

Lying still in the ocean, it was perfectly feasible to swim provided a lookout was posted at the masthead to spy for marauding sharks Accordingly, Kim Teputo climbed the mast, scanned all round and declared the vicinity shark-free, whereupon his shipmates and the girls leaped over the side

Suzanne and Cy were lying together in their favorite shaded spot up in the bow. Prevented by lassitude and a lazy feeling of well being from braving the cool kiss of the ocean, they remained where they were, Suzanne lying on her front and looking out across the water, Cy dozing by her side.

The eight bronzed, nude swimmers disported below her, sometimes appearing only as dark shadows beneath the intense blueness, sometimes leaping out of the water like dolphins; following their inclinations, the first to leap was invariably a girl—with a man trying to grab hold of her.

Presently, their play became more explicit, with the men ganging up against one girl at a time; chasing and catching her; bearing her, screaming with pleasure, out of the water, arms and legs held splayed, while one by one they fondled, kissed and nuzzled her entire body. The other three girls looked on, flatly refusing to help their *consoeur*, eager only to be next in line for the men's attentions.

But it was during the next figure in their complex love play, when the swimmers paired off and swam together, piggyback, that Suzanne became caught up in the spirit of their lively eroticism. She experienced the familiar baring of her nerve ends, the sense of knowing and feeling every inch of her skin. She turned to Cy, who was lying with eyes closed, arms stretched out, looking like a warrior chief laid out on his funeral pyre.

Slowly, with infinite care not to awaken him too soon, she advanced upon his body with her hands and her lips, calculatedly teasing and arousing him, so that he rose from the mists of sleep with desire already upon him and a nude and beautiful woman, his lover, already in his arms and wanting.

They remained where they were in the coolness of the bow; and he gently led her to unimaginable places, while the ocean lapped gently against the ship's side and the delighted screams of the island girls echoed across the glassy calm. Kim Teputo, high up the mast and in clear view, affected not to notice the transport of passion that was taking place below him, though Suzanne's moans of ecstasy must have reached his ears.

It was of a piece with the Polynesian tradition, his total shutting-out of the scene below him. The taboo of modesty in lovemaking was all, but in times long past and forgotten, when the Polynesians made their epic voyages across the burden of the great ocean in their tiny, open canoes, necessity had demanded a modulation of the taboo. Lovers, driven by irresist-

ible necessity to slake their desires, became nonpersons and nonevents in the cramped confines of the frail craft that bore them

True to his inborn ethic, Kim Teputo simply did not *see* the two lovers, but addressed himself to keeping a sharp lookout for predatory sharks.

That evening, the wind sprang up to the force of a half-gale and brought them smartly to the island of Maupiti, their turning point.

At Maupiti, in the village of Vaiea, where the girl Anne-Marie had relations living, they spent their first night ashore since leaving Tahiti, for Anne Marie's relations summoned all or most of the 700-odd inhabitants of the island to the traditional tamaaraa, or feast. Ten suckling pigs were slaughtered, as were three-score cockerels and a pair of plump veal calves There were enough crustacea to stock a fair-sized lagoon, and white-fish galore, together with the fruit and vegetables of the islands, and there was locally brewed beer, augmented with wines from the holds of the *Joseph Conrad*.

The feast began at sundown and lasted through the night till all was eaten and all had had their till. The skittish rhythm of the drums kept the young folk, and many of the not-so-young, on their feet and dancing till dawn Suzanne noticed that, lively though the festivities became, the presence of children and older folk precluded the sort of nudity and sexual license to which she had become accustomed aboard the *Joseph Conrad*. The drums, however, did not fall silent till the sun was high above the coconut palms, nor was there a nubile young couple to be seen about till well after noon on the following day, Suzanne and her lover not excepted.

It was the end of the odyssey Three hundred and fifty-odd kilometers separated them from their base in Tahiti, all of it in a southeasterly direction and against the prevailing wind, which meant long and tedious tacking to and fro, doubling the distance and more.

The schooner slipped out of the lagoon on the morning of the next day, escorted by every craft on the island, and there were many Suzanne, Cy and the others, laden down with garlands of exotic flowers and presents galore (including two live suckling pigs to join the over pampered Claude), waved till they were out of sight of the hospitable islanders By dawn the following day, the *Joseph Conrad* was sailing close hauled

on a gaining tack with a half-gale acting upon her taut sails like finger and thumb pressed against a moist orange pip The wind never let up throughout the whole of the passage, though Suzanne willed it with all her heart to do so. Traiatea and Tahaa slid past close by, but out of sight in a rain squall, they never saw Huahine, nor Moorea. On the last night of the passage, Suzanne went on deck alone and stood by the mainmast, staring out across the dark water, listening to the bow wave hissing past the schooner's sharp stem.

It's over, she told herself. Another chapter in my life. An idyll that I shall never be able to recapture, except in memory.

What lies ahead? . . .

A lifetime with Cy and tranquillity? It sounded unlikely for an Armenian girl, a Thursday's child, moreover

She stretched out her small hands into the night. Hold on to love and life with both hands, Suzanne. Life, like the voyage through the Society Islands, must have a beginning, a middle and an end. May the middle and the end match up with the beginning!

Before dawn on the following morning, the harbor lights of Papeete and the lights of the channel buoys came up out of the darkness The *Joseph Conrad* slid through the channel of the reef in the gray light and came to rest in the crowded anchorage

At midmorning, a motorboat came out from the shore. In it, sheltered under a fringed awning, was a gentleman of European appearance, in a white suit and Panama hat, with steel-rimmed half-glasses perched near the end of his sunburned, peeling nose.

"My God—here's old Timmy Avery!" exclaimed Cy Delamere, referring to the lawyer whose many excellences he had recounted to Suzanne. "And looks as if his grandma's just died and left her fortune to a dogs' home Hi, there, Timmy! What the hell are *you* doing in Tahiti?"

The lawyer did not then reply, being engaged upon negotiating the gap between the motorboat and the schooner's companion ladder, encumbered as he was by a briefcase, which he had snappily refused to entrust to the hand of a crewman who reached down to unburden him of it.

Suzanne was struck with a premonition

This man brings bad news, she told herself. A harbinger of disaster, that's what he is.

As I live and breathe, I *know* it . . .

PART IV

The Time of Trial

Chapter 1

Avery did not reply to his employer's question till he had seated himself down in the saloon, mopped his sweating brow with a large scarlet handkerchief, accepted the offer of a drink, tasted it and nodded a qualified approval.

"Cy, I've got bad news for you," he announced. And cocked his eye toward Suzanne.

"Speak freely, Timmy," said Delamere, intercepting the glance. "Suzanne and I are engaged."

"Indeed? Then I should like to offer my congratulations, Cy, and to you, my lady, my condolences." The eyes twinkled behind the thick lenses, removing any malice from the remark. "But I thought—I seem to remember—that there are still *impediments? . . .*"

"After I'm divorced," said Suzanne.

"Ah, quite," responded the lawyer, and dropped his eyes to a sheaf of papers that he had taken from his briefcase.

Suzanne guessed him to be about Cy's age but not so well preserved. Very English, very reserved, with an edge of sharpness that she had come to connect with men of the legal persuasion. A bit schoolmasterish. But quite nice-looking, for all that he was balding and myopic. And very good teeth.

"All right, Timmy," said Cy. "Shoot!"

Avery came straight out with it. "While you've been away, all hell has cut loose," he said. "Taking advantage of your absence, Wessex-Seabright has made a takeover bid for your United Kingdom holding company and associates, and unless we move pretty damn quick, they're going to scoop the pool for peanuts."

"The devil they have!" responded Delamere, pouring himself a Scotch. "And who cooked that one up?"

"Need you ask? The Nielsen woman," replied Avery. He glanced sharply toward Suzanne. "Did you say something, Lady Einskattle?"

"I did," responded she. "But let it pass, Mr. Avery."

"When did it blow up?" asked Delamere, settling himself down in a wicker chair beside his aide. I never saw him looking so cool, so collected, so master of himself and the situation, thought Suzanne. Quite unperturbed, and, surely, this news is of disaster dimensions?

They talked at length. "Our directors hold five percent of the equity . . . the American companies hold a ten percent stake . . . Your own interests, Cy, we estimate at around twenty-five percent."

"Then what the hell are we worried about, for Chrissake, Timmy?"

Her attention wandered from the baffling technicalities to the characters of the two men involved in the discussion. Strong men, both, Avery, in his arguments, was more than holding his own with his superior, who in his turn deferred to the other's terse, concise and obviously valid submissions.

"Sure, the investors have the benefit of a well-covered seven-point-seven percent yield, but you have to remember, Cy, that midyear pre-tax profits fell by just over ten million pounds to thirty million pounds, and full results for the current year will certainly show a profit fall from sixty-eight million pounds to around fifty-two point five million pounds. It doesn't strengthen our hand with the investors, Cy."

The characters in the dialogue apart, her interest and attention wandered, lost as she was in the intricacies of their discussion. Out of his briefcase with the sheaf of papers Avery had also brought a much folded and crumpled copy of a London national daily that had obviously occupied him on his flight to the South Seas, the journal was folded at the page containing the crossword puzzle, which had been completed with neat, clerkish capital letters. As their voices droned on, she idly picked it up and glanced at its date and saw, as she had anticipated, that it was more than a week old. So Avery must have been cooling his heels for several days in Papeete waiting for their return.

"Of course, a major attraction to Wessex-Seabright are our provincial dailies and evening papers, Cy. Add to that the cash surplus and a strong balance sheet . . ."

She turned to the front page. More trouble in Central Amer-

ica and the pound doing badly against the dollar. Russia was taking a hard line over whale fishing. Some demented fool was planning to fly from one end of the Mediterranean to the other in a hang glider. So, while we've been away, nothing's changed: the world is still going its own sweet, demented way. You can't halt progress, it's got to go on and on . . .

She saw it then. The name, glanced over first, she returned to on the second thought. Made its connection with the shock headline — in disbelief. Disbelief hardening to certainty, she cried out.

"Suzanne, darling, what's the matter?"

Both men rose to their feet, perturbed to see the pain and horror written all over her face. She tried to answer, but she had lost the means to control her slack, trembling lips. She could only murmur incoherently and hold out the newspaper for Cy to read. He took it from her.

HORROR BLAZE IN
PARIS NIGHTCLUB
16 DEAD—MANY INJURED

From Our Paris Correspondent

In the early hours of Sunday morning, a fire broke out in the exclusive Ninety-Eight Club situated in the city's smart 8th District. Within minutes of the alarm being raised, the rooftop premises of the club were a blazing inferno. Eyewitnesses state that the flames rose high into the air and could be seen as far away as Montmartre. Despite the prompt arrival of the Fire Brigade, the premises were almost completely gutted before the blaze could be brought under control. It is believed that a total of 16 people perished in the inferno of horror while between 30 and 40 received injuries, some grave. The death toll is expected to rise by as many as six.

THE TOP PEOPLE

The Ninety-Eight Club (the origin of the title is unknown) was the brainchild of Alphonse Clouet, 57, who himself died in the fire. Illegitimate son of a Marseilles prostitute, he was known to his well heeled clients as "Monsieur le Comte" and

posed as a member of the French nobility. Clouet's genius lay in making his club membership list so exclusive that even the Top People were refused entry if their manners did not match up to his high standards. He leaves a widow and seven children.

HOSTESS HEROINE

Survivors state that the death toll would have been heavier but for the selfless heroism of a club hostess, Gertrude Myers, 26, an American, who broke a skylight window and assisted many to climb up and make their escape across the rooftops. Said a survivor, Sheik Moulay Mansour: "Gertrude was a true heroine. Many owe their lives to her and she will be mourned." Miss Myers was not among the rescued. Her body was found beneath the skylight window through which she had assisted so many to safety before she was overcome by smoke and fumes.

SAFETY—QUESTIONS ASKED

Describing the club premises as "a firetrap," Fire Chief Armand Perrier stated this morning that there was definite evidence of the city fire regulations having been deliberately circumvented . . .

A doctor had been sent for, and he had given her some capsules to make her sleep. She was docility itself, she took them in her mouth but spat them out as soon as his back was turned.

Alone, she lay back in her bunk, arms pillowed behind her head, staring up at the shifting patterns of light on the ceiling above; thinking, thinking . . .

Thinking of Gertrude. There was never any doubt in her mind, then or later, that the heroine of the Ninety-Eight Club was *the* Gertrude, her friend. To have died in such an appalling way. Alone. With death all around her, and the last hope of salvation gone . . .

With a moan, Suzanne turned over on her face and wept salt tears into her pillow. Presently, Nature supervened, denied her fervent wish to stay awake at all costs and drifted her imperceptibly into sleep.

Her fears had been well founded. Her treacherous mind commanded her, in her dream, to be a child again and running through the strange house, up tortuous, winding staircases and

down long, echoing corridors, and always with the desperate urgency of one who knows—though from nothing but instinct—that haste was useless, and that the faster one ran, the slower the progress. But the dream persisted, till she had found her agonized way to the door on the upper floor, from which smoke was pouring at every chink. For the hundredth time, she hammered and wrenched till the stiff handle gave before her efforts and she was faced with the horror within . . .

She woke up screaming—as she always did.

Cy was the first to burst in, Timmy Avery was behind him. Cy nodded to his companion and closed the door on him.

"Darling, darling—what *is* it?"

"Oh, Cy—Cy, my love. Hold me tightly. Don't let me go!"

He cradled her in his arms, feeling her delicate bones beneath the thin shift that she wore, glorying even in those moments of anguish at the softness and roundness of her body that he knew so well, so intimately, but always with the surprise of newness.

"What happened? Did you have a bad dream?"

She nodded against his shoulder.

"The doc's knockout pills must have upset you."

"I didn't take the bloody things. If I had, I might never have awakened. The dream might have gone on. And then—and then—Oh, Cy, I sometimes think I'm going mad!"

"If you're mad, my darling, the sun and the moon and the stars are mad, everything that's good in life is mad—and I'm not having that."

"Don't leave me—stay with me. Make love to me—anything—but don't leave me alone. Don't—don't let me go to sleep again!"

(Memories of another time, another place, another man to whom she had made the same desperate plea . . .)

"I'm with you. I'm with you always. Want to talk about your dream?"

She shook her head. "I—I couldn't."

He nodded. "Then lie down, darling, and we'll talk of other things."

She smiled thankfully as he climbed into the bunk beside her.

Timmy Avery was for an immediate return to London, for Cy to fight the threatened takeover in person.

"The Duke of Wellington once said," declared the lawyer,

"that the presence of Napoleon on the field of battle made the difference of forty thousand men, and Wellington was no fool—he knew the value of charisma. We're going to need all the charisma you possess, Cy, if we're to lick La Nielsen and her cohorts. Did you say something, Lady Einskattle?"

The urgency of their departure had posed transport problems. At a peak tourist season, seats on scheduled flights out of Papeete were booked solid, likewise regular charter bookings. By shopping around, however, Avery booked an irregular flight on a wartime DC 7 to an unnamed airfield in an adjacent island. From there they were flown to Noumea, where they were able to pick up the last three available seats—tourist class—to London.

At Singapore, Avery contrived to inform the London office that they were on their way.

"The office is not unduly impressed," he announced upon his return. "It's seven in the morning there. I spoke to the charlady who's vacuuming the boardroom. She said she didn't give a damn whether we came or went."

Beyond Singapore, the pilot attempted to circle a bad storm and got himself hooked up in the middle of it. For three and a quarter hours, the airliner bucked and reared and made three-quarters of its passengers as sick as dogs. Alone of the tourist passengers, Suzanne and Cy ate a commendably good dinner and shared a bottle of Dom Perignon. Somewhere approaching Sri Lanka, in the dimmed-out cabin, Suzanne was awakened by a cry that she had heard before.

"Watch your tail, Ted! Christ, he's on to you!"

Life and times in the egalitarian society of the tourist class do not permit the kind of eccentricities that are smiled on in the more soigné ambience of the front end. By Cy's second outburst, he was being reviled in angry tones of half a dozen languages, stewardesses were snapping on lights and Suzanne was constrained to wrap her arms about him and half-wake him.

"It's all right, darling. It's all right."

"Ted—Ted!"

"Ted's okay, darling."

From behind. "Sure, tell him Ted's on the moon so we can all get some sleep!"

He half-woke in her arms. "Are you all right, darling?" he asked her. "I thought. I thought I heard you call out."

"It was nothing, darling," she assured him. "Go back to sleep."

He grinned. "I guess we both drank too much of the Dom Perignon before retiring," he said.

"Maybe."

"'Night."

"'Night."

Cy was in the window seat. He was soon sleeping soundly, his head thrown back. For the first time in her life, Suzanne felt what it must have been like to crave something she had never had—a cigarette. The seat on her other side—occupied by a Pakistani lady who had gone to the toilet—was empty at the moment. Timmy Avery stole from across the aisle and slipped into it.

"Cy all right?" he asked.

"A bad dream," she replied.

"I've seen it before."

"What does one do about it?"

"It only happens in airplanes One simply does nothing. He won't own up to it tomorrow."

"I see."

"I'm sure you do. As one used to say in my young days, you're very 'stuck' on him, aren't you?"

"Yes. Is that a good thing, do you think?"

"Good for whom? For Cy? For you?"

"You tell *me*."

The eyes behind the thick lenses flickered away from her. His fingers, long and sensitive, like Cy's, she thought, came together, the fingertips tapping gently.

"Good for him, certainly," he said. "For you, Suzanne, I wouldn't know. I haven't had a lot of experience of Cy versus womankind. In the limited experience I have, I've observed him to be civil and gallant to a degree that's almost unfashionable nowadays in the male approach to women "

"That's a very guarded answer, Timmy. You can do better than that, surely. Tell me about some of Cy's specific relationships. Tell me about"—it had to be asked of a third party, and she felt like a Judas in the asking of it—"his relationship with Nadia Nielsen."

The myopic eyes sought hers The handsome, inscrutable, legalistic countenance betrayed nothing.

"Why, surely you know," he said.

"Should I?"

"Why, yes."

"Well, I don't," she said. "You tell me."

"Nielsen is a hundred percent lesbian," he said. "What is known in some circles – circles in which I do not claim to have any connection—as a 'raving dyke'! Does that answer your question, Suzanne?"

The return of the Pakistani lady, and his hurried withdrawal, precluded any further discourse.

The return to England of Suzanne, Countess of Einskattle, and her "escort," Cy Delamere (Cy's styling was heavily into single or double quotes in all but the quality London dailies), rated front-page news in a week where nothing much else was happening on the world scene. Predictably, Seymour Morell of the *Courier* went to town. Steering the narrow channel between the Scylla of utter bad taste and the Charybdis of libel, Morell contrived to point out that Suzanne, the bankrupt daughter of a known financial crook, while being the faithless wife of a noble Scottish lord of impeccable character, had attached herself to an international tycoon by way of a meal ticket. It was not so brutishly spelled out but was so interpreted by the *Courier*'s readership, who knew how to read between the lines.

Cy and Suzanne had established themselves in his apartment in Albany, that enclave of discreet prestige and wealth scarcely dreamed of by the bustle of people who pass by its unremarkable, guarded entrance. Cy had copies of all the papers; he was furious.

"I won't have the buggers do this to you!" he stormed. "Suzanne, I think you should go abroad till this takeover issue is settled. Dieppe. Deauville. Somewhere handy where I can fly over for weekends in a private plane from a quiet airfield."

"I don't want to leave you, Cy," she said. "Do you *really* want me to go?"

"No, I don't."

"So, all right. Let's forget it."

"Okay." He sat himself down in his favorite leather-covered armchair and smiled across at her, she in jeans and a T-shirt, darning a pair of socks—his socks.

"I had a letter today," he said.

"You had at least twenty," she countered. "So what's new?"

"Well, this one was something special," he said. "It was from a high up guy in the British Establishment. It seems that

your handsome hero has found some favor here. The phrase he used was 'service to the press and to British industry generally.' And how about that?"

"Oh, Cy, how nice. And how well-deserved. Are they going to give you a medal or something?"

He grinned like a schoolboy who has just survived a caning without shedding a tear and is now enjoying the adulation of his classmates "They ask me if I've any objection to being made a Knight Commander of the Bath," he said.

"A knight! Oh, Cy, I'm so happy for you. 'Sir Cyrus Delamere'—it sounds wonderful."

"Being an American citizen," he said, "it'll be an honorary knighthood without the title, like the one they gave Omar Bradley, but there'll be a pretty cross to wear on high days and holidays. And incidentally, darling, the whole thing's a dead secret. The letter was by way of finding out if I'd accept should the announcement be made."

"And you'll accept?"

"Too right. Indeed, I'm half inclined to take out British citizenship just to make you a lady."

"I *am* a lady," said Suzanne, "and it isn't a hell of a lot of fun. My ambition is to be plain Mrs. Cy Delamere just as soon as it can be fixed. But I'm so happy for you, darling. So well-deserved, so very well-deserved."

Timmy Avery called later that day. From his demeanor, from the way he kept shooting sidelong glances at Suzanne, then at his watch, then at Cy, she had the distinct impression that something was on his mind Since he did not unburden himself before he rose to go, she accompanied him out of the apartment and along the pleasant, cloisterlike arcade of Albany.

He shot her a grateful glance "I'd hoped to find you alone, Suzanne," he said. "Cy was supposed to be flying to South Wales today."

"I fancy he's decided to declare today a holiday," she said.

"On account of the forthcoming knighthood?"

"You know about it?"

"I was partly instrumental in fixing it. A word here, a word there. That's how the world goes round in this country, as everywhere else. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Then what do you want to talk to me about, Timmy?"

His myopic gaze shifted uneasily "Suzanne, the counter-takeover thing is going pretty well. I would say that, barring

accidents, we shall be in the clear by the end of the year. Yes, I would say that by the end of the year—and entirely on the strength of Cy's reputation in every respect—we shall have beaten off Wessex-Seabright. Only . . ."

"Only?"

He took a deep breath. "Suzanne, our strength—our fundamental strength—lies in the support of the small shareholders who provide the margin of voting majority we need. They include a lot of people with basically conservative views. We often say that our archetypal shareholder is a retired naval commander and his wife living in mid Devon with a dog and a cat. These people, Suzanne, aren't going to like the sort of stuff that the *Courier* put out on you and Cy today."

"I see, Timmy."

His eyes sought hers, shyly. "You do?"

"You want me to go. To back out and leave him—for his sake, for all your sakes."

"It would only be for a while," he said. "Just till the dust has settled and we've sent La Nielsen and her cohorts running off with their tails between their legs."

She laughed. "Oh, Timmy, Timmy," she said, "you know the way to my heart, don't you? You know that the very mention of the Nielsen woman is calculated to set my hackles rising. Yes, I'll do it. I'll go away."

"Cy might object."

"Cy has already suggested it for my sake. No problem. Leave it to me, Timmy."

He took her proffered hand. "I think we're just about on kissing cousin terms by now," she said. And gave him her cheek to peck.

Nothing had changed. The walk up flat at 13 *bis* rue de Bac was exactly as she had left it, with her second-best palette still with her last day's working of paint, dried, now, to the consistency of enamel, and the oil and turpentine dippers full of dead flies. The painting upon which she had been working when Cy had descended upon her and borne her away to paradise—one of her eternal half-nudes—was there on its easel, and didn't look half bad.

She scraped off the thick of the old paint from the palette, squeezed her usual range of colors from fresh tubes, flushed the flies' mausoleum down the lavatory and replenished the dippers. When she was done, she peeled off her sweater and

bra and regarded herself in the mirror, then her unfinished self in the painting.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she murmured, "you have changed."

It was useless to attempt to finish that particular picture, for the skin tones were entirely different. Instead of a classic ivory-colored torso, she was now faced with a bronzed island girl, a surrogate Polynesian, with breasts as brown as her cheeks, breasts that had been bared to the sun of the South Seas, that had been kissed and fondled over uncounted days and nights of tropical paradise.

The association of ideas sparked dark desires in her flesh Her fingers stole to her breasts, touched them, as a lover will, felt their roundness, their weight and texture; plucked at the nipples and made them proud Breathless, now, she tore at the fastenings of her jeans and kicked them off.

It was as if her lover had carried her over to the bed and laid her there. His hands, not hers, informed her needful spirit of the solace it craved; his hands led her—as they had so often in the paradise of the South Seas—to visions undreamed of in the higher firmanent.

When it was done and she lay panting and replete, Suzanne wept for wanting him.

"Oh, Cy, my darling, my darling. How am I going to live through all those days and nights without you?"

Cy rang her daily. Yes, things were going well. Even the *Courier* had turned off the heat, had even implied that he and Suzanne had broken up (she suspected that this was the result of a tip-off given them by Timmy Avery—it had his style). He suggested coming over to Paris the following weekend, a proposal that quickened her breath and made her flesh tingle with the most delicious anticipation.

He was coming on Friday evening. On Thursday, she cleaned the flat from top to bottom, even went out and bought a vacuum to suck up countless years of dust. Generations of spiders' webs, also, were swept down the sloping rafters. She cleaned windows, both inside and out, the latter course necessitating leaning out of the window at a dangerous and entirely inappropriate angle, which brought some ribald comment from passing *flâneurs* in the street below, for there is nothing that so stimulates the appreciation of your average Parisian like the sight of a pretty woman in a predicament

No dining out at Maxim's or the Tour d'Argent; she would

prepare a candlelit supper that would serve as a memorable entrée to the delights that would follow. The culinary shortcomings of the flat (she had only a single gas ring) called for something cold, so cold it would be: consommé, followed by smoked salmon, then a duck *en gelée*, closing the whole scrumptious meal with his favorite dessert, chocolate mousse. The wines would be a paper-dry chablis with the fish, and a château bottled claret with the duck

She was like a schoolgirl released from class and drove the shopkeepers of the district half crazy with her tireless search for perfection in all the ingredients The whole of Friday afternoon she spent doing her hair: trying various ways of arranging her lustrous and accommodating locks into new and sophisticated modes to delight her lover; finally settling for her usual but becoming chignon.

She knew the time of his plane's arrival They had weighed the question of her meeting him at the airport and decided against it A limousine from his Paris office would be picking him up Allowing for the evening rush hour, assuming the plane was on time, she knew within five minutes when he must arrive, when she would hear his footsteps mounting the stair outside, when she would fling open the door and rush into his waiting arms The optimum time was six-twenty

At six o'clock, she was pacing the floor and feeling queasy in her stomach, as if she were in a dentist's waiting room At six five, the bang of a door downstairs sent her rushing out on to the landing to see if it was her lover It was not. At six fifteen, she took herself in hand: sat down and forced herself to do a little petit point with which she occasionally filled an empty hour At half past six, she decided that he had missed the plane Or that the plane had crashed Or that the limousine had crashed Or that he had chucked her for someone else

Footsteps! . . .

She barely had time to reach the door before the knock came He must have been wearing rubber soles, which was unusual for him, his footsteps always falling loud and firm

"Hello, Suzanne. It's me."

"*Timmy*—but . . . where's Cy?"

"He isn't coming, Suzanne."

"He's—he's not? . . ."

"Cy's fine. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

She eyed him warily. The lawyer carefully laid his hat and umbrella on the painting table close by her palette, and she had the clear impression of a man composing his mind for an ordeal

"Suzanne, you—"

"Timmy, for heaven's sake—"

"I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry, Timmy Please go on."

"Suzanne, I've got bad news for you. I thought it best to keep Cy out of it, so I cooked up a small crisis in New York that meant that he had to fly over there this evening. He told me to come and see you in Paris, take you out to dinner. And here I am—with the bad news."

"Then you'd better give it to me, hadn't you, Timmy?"

Lawyerlike, he approached the kernel of the subject the way a cat tackles a basin of cream· warily, from all sides, scenting the air, weighing the possibility of the stuff being poisoned, or maybe not cream at all. But he finally came around to it.

"It's been assumed by . . . certain parties," he said, "that I'm acting for you." He blinked behind the thick lenses and gave her his wintry, curiously disarming smile "As, it goes without saying, I should be most happy to do."

"Act for me—*how?*"

"Lord Einskattle is asking leave to petition for divorce "

"He's going to divorce me? But that can't be so, Timmy. Not till three years have passed."

"In certain circumstances, it might be possible, Suzanne."

"But that's wonderful —wonderful!" A great vista of splendor opened up before her eyes. "Cy and I can be married soon. How soon?"

He did not match her delight; the sad spaniel's eyes behind the thick lenses continued to regard her dolefully "I'm afraid the particular framing of your husband's petition leaves us very little room for self-congratulation," he said quietly.

"So explain to me. Timmy Oh, and do sit down. It's very remiss of me. What can I be thinking of? Would you like a drink?"

"Yes, please. A dry sherry if you have one."

She poured him the wine, marveled to see that her hand was not trembling.

"So? Do go on."

"Thank you. Now, Suzanne, normally, no leave to petition

can be presented to the court before the specified period of three years from the date of the marriage. Your very good health. Excellent sherry."

"That's what I've always believed. And then one simply fills in a form at the post office or someplace and the thing goes through —like getting a car license."

He looked at her severely over his half-lenses, but a faint and puckish smile belied his glance. "I think the court doesn't see it in *quite* that light," he said, "but your point is taken. There are exceptions to the three-year rule, however. First, a judge of the court may, on an application made to him, allow the petition to be filed inside the specified period on the ground of exceptional hardship suffered by the petitioner."

"The petitioner—that's Jock?"

"Your husband, yes."

Suzanne laughed shortly "Exceptional hardship—Jock! Yes, I suppose he's suffering hardship in a way. Daddy's estate still owes him the biggest part of one and three-quarter million pounds that Daddy blew on refurbishing Castle Einskattle, and he must be at his wit's end for ready money. But that can't be the reason for his divorcing me inside three years."

The lawyer took a sip of his wine; replaced the glass carefully on the table by his elbow.

"There is another condition," he said, "in which a petition might be allowed within the specified period "

Suzanne felt that they were coming to the nub of the matter: she tensed herself.

"And what's that, Timmy?" she asked

"A judge of the court may also allow a petition to be filed in the case of certain . . conduct by the respondent."

"The respondent being me."

"Yes "

"This conduct you speak of?"

"The wording of the Act describes it as exceptional depravity."

"Exceptional depravity?"

He ducked out from her glance, busied himself in a sheaf of papers that he took out of his briefcase; took off his glasses and polished them with quite unneccessary vigor, breathing on each lens several times, and finally replacing them on his nose to meet her shocked, outraged regard.

"It's possible that a judge will allow the application," he

said. "Holding, as he may, that there is a prima facie case for the petition to be heard on these grounds."

"Grounds—*what* grounds?" Suzanne was now on her feet and striding to and fro, arms folded: an Amazon affronted, furious, splendid in her fury "What has that bloody pervert of a husband cooked up against me?"

The myopic eyes descended to the sheaf of papers. "First," he said, "there is the allegation that you did, on the night of the Highland ball at Castle Einskattle, willfully display your naked person to your husband's guests, to his utter humiliation and to the discredit of his ancient title."

"The swine—the bloody swine!" Suzanne turned at the end of her perambulations, hair lashing her cheeks, eyes blazing. "It was he—drunk and lascivious brute as he was and is—who grabbed me, dragged up my skirt and showed me to everyone."

"There are depositions from two independent witnesses," said Avery mildly, "who will testify under oath that the action was performed by you without any prompting from Lord Einskattle or from anyone else."

"Who are they, these 'independent witnesses'?"

He referred to the papers. "Um—there is Mr Nicholas Aumerle McAlastair and—"

"And Tam Hagan! God, I might have known! I might have guessed that he'd corral his two cronies to lie their heads off for him! What next? What else? What other lies? Don't tell me that a learned judge is going to let Jock Einskattle divorce me on the evidence of a pervert and a couple of lickspittles. God, I would stay married to him till my dying day and live in sin with Cy till then rather than give him that satisfaction "

Avery rustled the papers, reading, avoiding her blazing eyes. "There is the matter of . . . your adultery with a named man," he murmured.

"Adultery with Cy! Oh, God! Cy needs that at a time like this!"

"Lord Einskattle, I am informed, is prepared to leave Cy out of it for a consideration. The man named is his brother, Ian Einskattle."

"Oh, God, no—not that!" She sank slowly to her knees by the armchair, buried her face in her hands, was very still and silent for a while.

"Is there substance in the allegation?" asked Avery

She nodded.

"There was the single occasion, not repeated?"

"Yes."

"Oh, dear. And I'm very much afraid that Lord Einskattle is determined to cite his brother. He must hate him very much. As, I'm afraid, he must hate you also, Suzanne."

Her eyes blazed to meet his. "Then does *that* constitute my 'exceptional depravity'?" she demanded. "One makes a complete and utter fool of oneself in a moment of stress, and it becomes 'exceptional depravity,' to be sniggered over by the readers of the Sunday pornographic press!"

"The issue of adultery with your brother-in-law, upon whatever justification, and whether repeated or not, is a strong linchpin of the Earl's case," said Avery. "If you concede that adultery took place – and in view of the testimony that will be offered, I don't see how you can not—"

"The chambermaid?"

He consulted the papers. "Jessie Ada Hemstock, aged twenty-eight, unmarried . . ."

Hemstock! Suzanne felt the bars of a cage closing in about her. Jock Einskattle, Hemstock, McAlastair, Hagan, the rest of them. And who would speak out in her favor in the land of the lordly Einskattles? No one. The might and majesty of the Einskattles rules supreme in Einskattle land – and she had seen the power in action many times. Against that, what had she to offer? She who was no more than an interloper. An outsider. A wog. A woman, moreover, who, in the heartland of unbending Calvinism, had sinned by lying with her husband's brother!

Lawyer Avery was droning on. "Taking the adultery into account along with the alleged incident at the Highland ball, and various other alleged incidents—"

"*What* other incidents?" she blazed. "What other lies has he cooked up against me?"

He referred to the papers again. "There is an affidavit," he said, "that, upon your return from honeymoon in Venice you did, in the first-class compartment of an airliner, loudly berate your husband in public regarding a young airline stewardess, stating, *inter alia*, 'For Christ's sake, Jock, take the bitch into the lavatory, get her panties off and have done with it.' Did you say that?"

She nodded dully. "We'd been drinking champagne for

breakfast. He was all over this pretty little bitch. It just slipped off my tongue."

"This incident was alluded to in the gossip column of the *Courier* shortly after you left the matrimonial home," said Avery, "though not, of course, in such specific terms. Nevertheless, in the plaintiff's submission, your conduct was exceptionally depraved, subjected him to utter humiliation and—"

"And discredited his ancient title," supplied Suzanne wearily. "Oh, my God, yes, how it must have done that! What else?"

"A whole raft of cuttings from the gossip column of the *Courier,*" said Avery, "relating to your scandalous behavior when a student immediately prior to your marriage, which might be admissible, since it bears upon your way of life, your morals, your reputation. If you were to give evidence on your own behalf, you would be closely cross-questioned on these matters, insofar as they relate to your character, which is the nub of the plaintiff's application "

"Any more, Timmy?"

He took a deep breath "As a supreme example of what the plaintiff describes as your exceptional depravity, he alleges that, while he was on duty as an officer of Her Majesty's Household Brigade, you did seduce him and cause him to perform sexual intercourse with you in the grounds of Buckingham Palace during a garden party. Oh, Suzanne –don't take on so!"

She was leaning against the seat of the armchair, the slow tears rolling down her satin cheeks.

"Oh, Jock, Jock," she whispered. "Where is now my golden boy? Where, my knight in shining armor? All gone on a summer's day!"

"They keep a good table here," said Timmy Avery.

The consommé, the smoked salmon, the duck *en gelée* and the chocolate mousse remained in her fridge. He took her to the Tour d'Argent for dinner and had been most solicitous in helping her to choose the dishes she most preferred, the wines that took her fancy. Suzanne, who would have as easily eaten bread and supped off a tin plate, pushed the expensive fare here and there and willed it to go away But drank a lot.

"What am I going to do, Timmy?" she asked. "And how much does Cy know about all this?"

"As to the latter, not much," said her companion. "I told him that I'd received this communication from Einskattle's solicitors and that I was assuming to act for you if you so wished."

"Does he know what Jock's trying to nail me for—this 'exceptional depravity' thing?"

"Not yet. When he hears, he'll just laugh. You know Cy "

"You're not laughing a lot, Timmy."

He fixed her with his now steady glance. She thought how very handsome he was, how straight, how like a person one could lean on and never find wanting "The law isn't for fun," he said. "Once the process is set in train, all sorts of evils can accrue from what appears to be good intent. I always remember the line from *The Merchant of Venice*

> *'In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt*
> *But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,*
> *Obscures the show of evil?'*

"Which brings me to your first question, Suzanne. As to how to advise you, I would say that Einskattle's case is arguable, and that a good counsel—and they'll brief a good counsel —could well destroy your reputation, which, presumably, is your husband's intention in seeking the petition As to the outcome, a lot depends on the judge. I think that most of the judges in the Family Division of the High Court, which deals with divorce, won't allow this petition, even taking into account your adultery with your brother-in-law, which is very much the linchpin of the argument, as I've said before. And, by the way, you won't wish to contest that particular issue?"

"Poor Ian," she said. "It will probably cost him his job as assistant headmaster of this school in Africa that's run by a tremendously strict Fundamentalist sect."

"Regarding young Master Ian," said Avery. "I don't wish to sound heartless, but the gentleman took his pleasures and should stand the cost. I see no reason why you should sacrifice yourself on the altar of *his* good name, Suzanne. If you contest the issue of this adultery, you will have to give evidence. If you give evidence—No, it isn't even to be considered! . . ."

"Then what, Timmy?"

"What we shall do," said Avery, primly arranging his knife and fork and spoon so that they were precisely aligned with the edge of the table and with his bread-and-butter plate, "is to admit our adultery with Ian Einskattle. As to the remainder of the allegations, we shall simply deny everything. The matter of the adultery with Cy you can safely leave with me to negotiate with my—informant. As I have said, Lord Einskattle is willing to leave Cy out of the petition for a consideration."

"A bribe, you mean."

Avery shrugged. "Would you have it otherwise, Suzanne?"

"Of course not."

"There's another point I must raise," he said, "however unpleasant.

"What's that, Timmy?"

"The gutter press will make a meal of you," he said. "By snide innuendo, by allusion, by journalistic trickery, they'll cut you to ribbons. The Great British Public will eat you alive. The saloon bars will resound with laughter at today's Lady Einskattle joke—*'Hey, have you heard the one about Lady Einskattle when she . . .'* And, of course, since the case will be heard in open court, there will be people there who will be in a position to carry the facts to those with a real, vested interest in your reputation, and in Cy's."

"Like Nadia Nielsen and Wessex-Seabright," supplied Suzanne. "Not to mention the top people in the Establishment who were thinking of giving Cy an honorary knighthood but will change their minds when they discover he's been shacked up with a woman of 'exceptional depravity.' And then there's the retired naval commander and his wife, cat and dog in Devon. He's not going to like it one bit. You'll have to kiss your countertakeover bid goodbye, Timmy."

"Shut up!"

He thumped the table so that the cutlery and glassware rattled and tinkled. A dozen affronted heads turned from all over the restaurant to see what was amiss. Timmy Avery paid no heed to them but continued to glare into her astonished eyes.

"I don't give a damn for Cy's little tin star," he said. "In the matter of the takeover, if it has to stand or fall on a trumped-up divorce petition brought by an insane pervert, let it be so. As for the retired commander in Devon . . ."

"So if these things don't matter to you, what *are* you getting

so keyed up about?" she demanded loudly. And the heads turned again.

"I care very much for your being eaten alive," he said quietly. "You and Cy have become very dear to me."

She stared at him in silence. "Oh, Timmy, I think I'm going to cry," she said.

"Here's my hankie—it's clean."

"Thanks."

The myopic eyes were earnest. "I want you to know, Suzanne," he said, "that I'll help you any way I can."

"Thank you, Timmy," she murmured.

There didn't seem much else to say

Timmy Avery returned to London on the overnight plane, leaving Suzanne with the knowledge that the divorce case *Einskattle v. Einskattle and Einskattle* would possibly be heard quite soon, that there would be no need for her to attend at the court, that she was admitting her adultery with Ian Einskattle but that he, Timmy, would take steps to have Cy withdrawn from the petition—which presumably meant paying over a sum of money to the indigent Earl. Her counsel ("Nick Clavery, Q.C.—an excellent chap, very sound on the pitfalls of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1973 and a first class man on his feet") would contest the other allegations by argument and cross-examination. And that, despite the dirt that would be thrown—a lot of which would stick—the chances were that Einskattle would not get a divorce on such shameful grounds

As a further bonus, the outcome of the case would in no way affect her own petition when she presented it at the expiration of the specified period. With luck, nothing would change, though she and Cy would still have to wait some years before they could be married.

Suzanne resigned herself to patience, addressed herself to her canvases, her petit point and the solitary life that was colored only by a daily phone call from the man she loved. Cy was—predictably—amused by the terms of Jock Einskattle's petition. He obviously knew and cared little about the ins and outs of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1973 upon which Mr Nick Clavery, Queen's Counsel, was so very sound, and had clearly been kept in ignorance by Timmy Avery on most of the aspects of the case, including his own proposed removal from the petition.

Apart from the delicious half hour every evening when she

spoke with her lover on the phone, Suzanne was solitary and celibate. An encounter with an old flame served to underscore her solitude and her celibacy.

It happened at the café of Les Deux Magots, famous meeting place for artists and intelligentsia in the Place St. Germain des Prés, where she regularly went for morning coffee and a look through the London papers—particularly the notorious *Courier*—for any news of Cy and herself. Of herself, she found nothing in the weeks that followed her departure from England, save the bald statement that her husband was petitioning for a divorce, but no mention of the causes. In this she thought she saw the hand of Timmy Avery and wondered how much of his company's money he was paying out to still the muckraking.

On this particular occasion, she was writing a postcard to Alice, with whom she had corresponded since her return from the South Seas. Alice had shifted flats to a more permanent abode in St. John's Wood, was still working at the supermarket and still "walking out" with undermanager Albert Morley, who did not appear to be coming up to scratch so far as the marriage stakes were concerned. Suzanne had just finished writing the address on the postcard when a shadow fell across her. She looked up to see Freddie Hopwood.

"Suzanne, darling, how are you? I must say you're looking fine."

"And you also, Freddie. You look more like a movie star pretending to be incognito than ever." As indeed he did, with his dark shades, Yves St. Laurent sweater and pants, Gucci shoes, Patek Philippe wristwatch, Garrard identity bracelet. "How's the Royal Academician?"

The Royal Academician was fine. He was the reason for Freddie's being in Paris, for the boyfriend was exhibiting with others at the Petit Palais It was not at all surprising that they should have met at Les Deux Magots, for "simply everyone" meets there.

Freddie ordered champagne; Suzanne pushed aside her coffee and joined him in drinking a half-bottle. Whether on account of the modeling or the Royal Academician, Freddie was clearly in the chips. He explained to Suzanne that it was a bit of both. The modeling was going well; he had been able to give up the College and take on private bookings with well-heeled painters and sculptors. The boyfriend (who was married) had set him up in a very swish flat in the Barbican and bought him presents galore. Of the latter arrangement he spoke with unself-con-

scious and unashamed candor, as he always did about matters concerning his highly unconventional private life. Distanced by her recent experience of love and marriage, she was able to appreciate how much she had learned from him about life in its many aspects, how he had shown her that oneself is not always the face one sees in the mirror, nor is anyone else's.

One half-bottle called for another, at the end of which they sallied forth up to the Boulevard Saint Michel to the Luxembourg Palace gardens, buying long ham sandwiches at a café along the way, and more wine.

Under the trees of the Luxembourg, side by side on a bench, with the leaves above already turning to gold at the summer's end, they ate and drank and fed crumbs to the Parisian sparrows, who are more selective than the sparrows of, say, Greenwich Village, and less bold than their confreres in Regent's park Later, by the Medici fountain, with rain threatening and thunder rumbling above the heights of Montmartre, Freddie asked Suzanne, part in earnest, part in jest, to marry him His unashamed relief when she lightly refused him was evidence that the latter emotion had been uppermost in his proposal

The rain arriving, and the prospect of going into the palace on the heels of a mob of tourists seeking shelter an uninviting prospect, Freddie opted to take her home in a taxi

Freddie Hopwood was a great operator in a taxi and frequently observed that it was in this setting that he made his most notable conquests, particularly with the distaff side. Like a good general staking out his battle lines in favorable terrain, he put his arm round Suzanne's waist immediately upon entering the vehicle and giving the order to the cabby The drive from the Luxembourg to the rue du Bac being really no distance at all, his was a campaign that would have to be swift and overwhelming to succeed.

At the junction of the boulevards, while keeping up a lively, light chatter to distract his opponent, he raised his hand from her waist to her underarm, from whence he immediately marched to take possession of the lower slope of her right breast

Suzanne's response was immediate Turning her head, she kissed him full upon the mouth, a lingering kiss that, upon first touch, Freddie supposed to be a mark of total surrender But when he probed those lips with his questing tongue and found the entrance sealed against him, he found himself the recipient of a tender, affectionate, but unmistakably *sisterly* kiss

Presently he broke clear of her, lips, hands and all, unable to bear the chagrin any longer.

"No go, huh?" he asked ruefully.

She shook her head. "No go, sorry, Freddie."

"This chap you mentioned back there—this Delamere chap the newspapers are hinting about—you're really stuck on him, eh?"

"Stuck on him"—the very words that Timmy Avery had used in the same connection. Funny that prim Tim and rackety Freddie used the same term to describe the state of being in love.

"Very stuck on him, Freddie," she said.

The taxi pulled up outside number 13 *bis*.

"'Bye, Freddie. Thanks for a lovely afternoon."

"Yeah, it's been fun. And Suzanne . . ."

"Yes, Freddie?"

"He's a lucky guy, that Delamere."

"I'm a lucky girl."

Freddie's importunities had not left Suzanne entirely unscathed. The association of her body's involuntary response to Freddie's love play, combined with images kindled in her mind by thoughts of Cy, who would be phoning her within the hour, so acted upon Suzanne's emotions that no sooner had she climbed the stairs and closed the door behind her than she peeled her shirt over her head and kicked off her jeans. Her stockings, pants and bra she strewed behind her on the way to the bathroom.

For half an hour she luxuriated in a hot bath, into which she had with careless profligacy poured a whole *flacon* of scent at one hundred dollars an ounce. There she daydreamed of her lover and ached to have him with her, to hear his tread on the stair, to see him when he opened the door and carried her, nude, wet and scented, to the bed. This fantasy prompted her to yet another, and she leaped out of the bath to prepare herself for the ring of the phone, which would mean that he was at the other end of the line in London, New York, Melbourne or wherever, but no farther from her spirit than the sound of his voice.

The phone rang on the stroke of seven. Thanks to the advantages of International Direct Dialing, Cy Delamere was able to indulge his obsession with punctuality.

"Suzanne."

"Hello, darling. How are you?"

"Fed up. This damned takeover is dragging on. Timmy tells me the other side is holding things up on a technicality. They've dragged in the Monopolies Commission and God knows who else to try and prove that we shouldn't own all these newspaper assets in the United Kingdom anyhow. I can't see any end to it right now. Wessex-Seabright has got something up its sleeve or it wouldn't be so desperately playing for time."

"My divorce, maybe? They hope to discredit you with the shareholders when the facts of the divorce come out. Oh, Cy, Cy, I've become a burden to you, darling."

"Nothing of the sort, Suzanne. We've defused that situation by your going to Paris. They'll get no mileage out of our relationship, my love. No—there's something else cooking, but I can't figure what. Anyhow, the hell with all that. How are you?"

"I thought you'd never ask me, sir, she said."

"Well?"

"Well, I'm fine, thanks."

"What are you doing now?"

"Lying on my bed, talking to you, handsome stranger."

"That sounds very enticing. I've a mind to hop a plane right now and join you. Would it be worth my while?"

"I'm wearing the chocolate-colored negligee. And nothing under."

"Not that chocolate-colored negligee that buttons all the way down the front? Don't tell me that, Suzanne!"

"The very same. The one with the buttons that come undone at the touch. Just by moving around. Just by shrugging one's shoulders."

"Tell me more—tell me how your hair's fixed."

"Loose—all over the pillow. The way you like it. And I'm covered in scent. The bedroom reeks like a whorehouse."

"One of the better type whorehouses, naturally."

"Of course."

"What else?"

"I'm wearing the lipstick you like me in best. Dior, 'Les Pimpants.' On my lips. And on my nipples."

"That plane I must catch!"

"Where are you, darling?"

"Winglebat, which is in Queensland, Australia. They make paper here for newsprint. Very good paper, I would add."

"You'll never get here before midnight, darling, when Cinderella has to leave the ball. But stay with me with your voice. Talk to me. Tell me how you arrive in your limousine downstairs, how you come on up, let yourself in, find me lying here waiting for you, as I am. These dreadful buttons. My hair all over the place the way you like it. My nipples painted with your favorite lipstick color . . ."

That line between Winglebat, Western Australia, and the 7th Arrondissement of Paris remained busy through the watches of that summer's evening, till the late chorus of starlings in the lime trees beneath her window was stilled and the boulevard was a string of lights like a fairy chain, till Suzanne, flushed, spent, breasts heaving with freshly requited passion, finally laid down the phone and drifted into a sleep of tranquillity.

Chapter 2

Jock Einskattle got leave to file his petition within three years, and the case of *Einskattle v. Einskattle and Einskattle* was set down for the first Monday of the Michaelmas Law Term in October. Timmy Avery informed her of this by phone, adding that he had exerted his own influence and that of his relations and friends in high places to have the petition heard at the earliest opportunity, even to the extent of a little queue-jumping.

There would be no need for Suzanne to appear in court, he told her; but it would be prudent for her to be in London if for any reason it was necessary for her to be called upon.

That evening when Cy phoned, they discussed ways and means. It was obviously imprudent for her to return to Albany. A discreet hotel outside of the West End—one of those decorous establishments that cater to retired gentlefolk as permanent guests and, to round out their takings, turn a blind eye to the better class of executive and his secretary posing as "Mr. and Mrs. Smith"—they dismissed as being equally injudicious. In the end, Suzanne, who had grown heartily bored with the endless weeks of her own company, plumped for asking Alice if she could put her up in St. John's Wood for the term of the divorce hearing. Cy thought it was a good idea. She wrote to her former maid and had a letter by return mail expressing Alice's delight at having "her dearie home again."

There were a few things to clear up in Paris, a few duties to perform. In discharge of the promise she had made to M. Martin at the picture gallery, she took along the paintings she had made during her voluntary exile so that he could set up a "one man" show for her in the Christmas season. There then remained her obligation to the memory of her sometime—

briefly—friend Gertrude Myers, the door of whose flat she never passed on her way up or down without recalling the girl's vivacity, her generous open-heartedness.

To the cemetery of Pere Lachaise she went on a rainy afternoon and sought out Gertrude's modest grave somewhere beyond the more soigné mausoleums of the great in that trackless, meandering city of the sleeping dead, with its swaying cypresses dripping greenness upon the marble and the granite and a sweet, nostalgic decay lying over all. There she laid a wreath of eternelles, lingering for a while in order to conjure up a suitably reverent memory of her late friend; but all that would come up was a picture of Gertrude at the Ninety-Eight Club, smart and pretty as paint, dressed just short of scandalous, wisecracking with the customers, for some of whom, all too soon, she was destined to lay down her life.

In Freddie Hopwood's words. "What you see in the mirror isn't always you—and that goes for everyone else!"

Upon a whim she went by rail and sea to England instead of by air; enjoyed (for she was an enthusiastic sailor, both before and after the *Joseph Conrad*) a boisterous Channel crossing and was met by Cy Delamere on the quay at Dover. They drove from there to a sleepy country hotel in the weald of Kent, with an original coaching yard and bedrooms set in galleries surrounding it. There was an oak-beamed dining room and a vast open fireplace rivaling the great hall at Einskattle.

That night, after so long a parting, they sought out again the many and delicious paths to ecstasy that they had discovered in the early days of their love affair. And devised many more.

Their imaginations were fired by a mutual delight in the beauty of each other's bodies and the gratifying ease in which each was able to please and excite the other. They devised artless improvisations, the further to extend the night of wakefulness. In a serious mood, he was a warrior returned from a bloody and wearisome fight, worn out from marching, fatigued and fit for nothing—not even for the beautiful captive he had taken as part of his booty; she must massage his jaded body with her soft hands, coax into life his flaccid muscles, excite his spent appetites by all the arts of a lover; till a small miracle was wrought, and warrior and captive were joined as one in a frenzied welter of self-immolation. For light relief, she was the prim young schoolma'am and he the roistering gambling man from off the Mississippi paddleboat, pocket full of dollars and looking for the whereabouts to lay his head. Now it was

she who was frigid and unyielding; he who must exercise the wiles of a practiced seducer. First, with infinite guile, he assured her that she was beautiful and proved it by persuading her to take off her granny glasses, unbind her hair and let it fly in the wind. The process by which the spinsterish schoolma'am was enticed into becoming an abandoned cancan dancer on the *Showboat*, and the lover of Gaylord Delamere, absorbed all their talents for improvisation—and their energies—till nearly dawn.

In the dawn light, lying in the crook of his arm, Suzanne said, "I'm dreading this divorce. I know it's going to turn out badly. I just *know!*"

"Timmy says it will all be okay," said Cy. "The testimonies that Einskattle has dredged up against you wouldn't hang a cat, he says, and Clavery will cut them to pieces in the witness box. By all accounts, it's a wonder the judge in chambers allowed it to be heard. Believe me, darling, it's going to be the nonevent of the year."

All the same, she thought—feeling his warmth and muscular hardness close against her, and her whole body alive and tingling from the things he had done to her during the long night of sweet abandonment—I've a queasy feeling that Jock won't be set aside so simply. The Einskattles have held on to what they've got for a thousand years, through good times and bad, through fire and slaughter. Jock won't give up without a fight.

Later, scanning the newspaper over breakfast, they all but missed a small item on the back page. The Honorable Ian Einskattle, brother of the thirteenth earl, had committed suicide in Malawi, after being dismissed from his post as assistant headmaster . . .

Cy had to fly to Belfast at noon. They parted in the hotel, and Suzanne traveled by train to London and took a cab to St. John's Wood.

"Suzanne! Deane!" Alice greeted her at the door of her ground-floor flat with an all embracing hug and many tears. The ex-lady's maid, whether from being deprived of a sybaritic life in the shadow of the very rich, or simply because her job in the servicing department of the supermarket kept her on the move, had lost at least ten pounds in weight. She looked ten years younger than her age in a well cut navy blue trouser suit

with a bandanna handkerchief knotted round her unlined and unwrinkled throat.

"Alice, darling, you look marvelous. Your figure's a rev elation You must let me paint you How's Mr Morley? How's the job? It's been so long Tell me everything!"

"That's my darling girl always wanted to know everything!" Taking her about the waist, the older woman led Suz anne into her open-plan sitting room, with its wide picture window giving views out onto the gardens and groves of bland St. John's Wood, the room quietly decorated in pastel shades of pink and beige, with a few good pieces of Victorian furniture, lots of potted plants and creepers in tubs and at least a dozen framed photographs of Suzanne and her mother There, sitting side by side, some of the time hand in hand, the two of them reminisced about the good days, forgetting the bad, while they sipped jasmine tea out of delicate Chinese bowls, a habit that both of them had inherited from the late, tragic Faye Garbisian Afterward, when the night closed down in the secret gardens of St John's Wood and cats went prowling among the dark groves of holly, laurel and yew, they supped together at a little table by the gas fire, savory pancakes of cheese and chopped mushrooms, one of Suzanne's favorites from nursery days

They retired at half-past ten Alice had only one bed a comfortable double in an alcove off the living room, with bathroom adjoining In the process of undressing and getting into bed, Suzanne was able to observe, with some pleasurable memories of the intimacies that they had shared together in the not so distant past, that her first impression of the new, svelte Alice was not dispelled by seeing her nude

When the older woman slipped into bed beside her, they both, at one accord, reached out to embrace, as they had always done in the old days. Cheek to cheek, bodies facing, breast to breast, thigh to thigh, heartbeats joining in unison, warm fingers aligned with the deep cleft of each other's back.

"This divorce of yours " began Alice

"They all tell me it's nothing," said Suzanne, "that the judge will throw it out, that there'll be some publicity, but nothing will emerge that will make it impossible for me ever to look Cy in the eyes again But sometimes I wonder "

"I've been worried for you, dearie, and that's the truth," replied the other "What with all the newspaper talk and all Do you think it's going to come out in court about that beast

Hemstock —the things he dreamed up for you in that sinful, depraved mind of his?"

"Thank God we found those photos and destroyed them," said Suzanne. "That, at least, I can rest easy about."

"It's small wonder I never suffer the slightest pang of conscience about being the cause of his death," said Alice. "And me brought up in the Religion—though it's half a lifetime since I heard Mass or confessed."

"Why should he be on your conscience?" replied Suzanne. "It was an accident, dear What you did was no more than accidentally drive over a venomous snake in the roadway." But in her mind, she was back again in their bed in St. George's Square, and the sleeping, distraught Alice was sobbing her confession in her ear.

"Your man knows nothing of what you suffered at Hemstock's hands?" asked Alice.

"I could never bring myself to speak of it," said Suzanne. "There are things that a man shouldn't have dragged out before his gaze and be expected to understand and to accept about a woman he loves."

"That's right enough," conceded the other. "There's some men who'd think that a woman should kill herself with her own two hands, or let herself be killed as a martyr of chastity, rather than let a brute defile her body the way Hemstock defiled ours."

"I don't think —indeed, I know that Cy wouldn't demand such standards of me," mused Suzanne, "but I would hesitate ever to look in his eyes again if he knew, for fear of what I might see there."

She was crying Alice felt the wet tears make a rivulet between her own breasts "Don't worry your sweet head, deane," she whispered "No one will ever know now, not about *that*."

"He's perfectly understanding about the rest," said Suzanne, anxious, even in her agony of mind, to present her lover in his best light "He accepts without question that the things Jock's bringing against me are either lies or twisted out of all recognition Even my adultery with poor little Ian Etnskattle he just shrugs off as a peccadillo But the other—the things with Hemstock " She shuddered, and Alice stroked the younger woman's tear-streaked face.

"He'll never know," she murmured "And you'll have to learn to live with your conscience, Suzanne, love Have to

accept that you didn't have it in you to become a martyr of chastity. That's the burden you must bear, as I must bear mine."

"Your . . . burden?"

"I lied to you that night, Suzanne. Frightened as I was, confused as I was, I still had the instinct for self-protection—even from my darling girl, for whose sake I did it.

"I lied to you, Suzanne, about the killing of that beast. While he was talking to me—telling me to take my clothes off and get into bed, for you'd be along to join us soon—I saw him try a cartridge in the gun and close the breech. And when I struck out, it was to smash the barrel against his head. He had his hand on the trigger and it was he who pulled it in his shock—but it could as lief have been my hand!"

"I'm sorry, Alice," breathed Suzanne, conscious of the great burden that must have sloughed from off the woman's mind in the telling of a thing that surely had been haunting her dreams and her waking hours ever since that awful night.

"I think the time has come," said Alice, "when I must go to the confessional and tell all this, and maybe to Mass, to pray for the soul of the man I killed. Are you warm enough, dearie?"

"Mmmm." Suzanne snuggled closer.

"There's one thing more I've decided tonight," said Alice presently. "You always said you were a Thursday's child with a long way to go, and that I was a cool, friendly place to rest along the way. Well, I reckon you've found what you were seeking, and that you don't need Alice anymore. That right?"

No answer. The girl in her arms was already asleep.

The morning of the divorce hearing dawned, and Suzanne, who had been living on tenterhooks and walking on eggs in the days leading up to it, had arranged to meet Timmy Avery at the Savoy during the court's luncheon break to hear how things were going. Cy was in Canada—to her heartfelt relief—exercising his considerable clout and muscle to clear what Avery had described to her as a logjam in the supply of newsprint to their presses in Britain and the United States. She could not run away from a distinct impression she had received that it was Timmy Avery himself, in her interests, who had created the "logjam" to keep Cy out of London during the term of the hearing.

Toward midday, she took the underground from St. John's

Wood to Trafalgar Square and walked along the Strand in the clear, autumnal sunshine, and many were the admiring eyes turned to regard and — according to gender and proclivities — admire or envy the brilliant brunette in the gray Givenchy two-piece suit and perky straw hat, with the warm smile for the old man at the newsstand from whom she bought a copy of the *Courier*, and the ready greeting for the hotel doorman who recognized her and addressed her by name.

Avery was waiting for her in the American bar. He rose upon her entrance and, settling her in a seat on the sofa by his side, fussed over her, fixed her up with a whiskey sour and totally ignored the question that screamed soundlessly across to him till the waiter had left them.

"It's going well, Suzanne," he said.

"Thank heaven for that!"

The cautious, lawyer's look slipped across his face like a mask, as if her relief had been too intense for his requirement. "It's too soon to count our chickens," he said, "but this afternoon's session will settle it one way or the other. Either the judge will stop the hearing, or she will allow your husband's *decree nisi*, or she will call the leading counsel for plaintiff and respondent into her chambers and instruct them to make some kind of settlement by tomorrow morning. In the latter case, Suzanne, I should like you to be in court tomorrow."

"Timmy—*must* I?" she pleaded, agonized.

"You won't be called upon to give evidence," he assured her. "Merely to be there, sitting with me behind our counsel, so that the judge's eye can fall upon you. Your appearance — the summation of your character that the judge will make when she sees you—will go a long way toward convincing her that Enskattle's petition is merely malicious."

"What if she doesn't like the look of me?" demanded Suzanne. "You know how some women are!"

"The Honorable Dame Evelyn Scrase is not one of those kind of women," he said. "In the six months since she was appointed to the Family Division, Dame Evelyn's been a model of even-handed judicial fairness. She won't see you as a young and beautiful woman but as a person whose honesty and probity are written large across her countenance. That's what you'll be there for, Suzanne: to show the learned judge not how lovely but how transparently *good* you are."

She lowered her eyes before his steady affectionate gaze

"Is Jock in court?" she asked.

"He is—and looking half insane," replied Avery. "Wild eyed and unkempt. Forever leaning forward and passing notes to his counsel, to the other's obvious annoyance and irritation. Upon being called to the witness box to give evidence of the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage, he contrived to give a most unfavorable impression to the court. In short, he looked and sounded like a man who was lying his head off for reasons of malice—which, of course, is a description that fits him admirably. Will you have another whiskey sour, or shall we go straight into luncheon?"

They were given Cy Delamere's special table in the grill room and all the attention that went with it. Avery did himself well with new season's native oysters and a steak, while Suzanne toyed with a Dover sole.

Her companion, between mouthfuls and declarations of their merit, was informative about the morning's proceedings. "The adultery issue was swiftly disposed of," he said. "Though, I must say, I had my fears that Einskattle, despite the very large amount that has been lodged for him in a Swiss bank account, would double cross us at the court door and cite Cy as another corespondent. He did not. No evidence was called. Nick Clavery rose and submitted that we admitted our adultery with the late Ian Einskattle. That part was all over in the time it takes to tell. Suzanne, I beg you to try one of these oysters, they are really delicious. No? Are you quite sure?"

"Thanks, no. Go on, please."

"The issues were submitted in the order in which they appeared in the depositions," continued Avery, disposing of the last of his dozen oysters at the close of the sentence. He dabbed his lips with his napkin. "Namely, our displaying our naked person on the night of the Highland ball. The petitioner's leading counsel questioned McAlastair, who testified under oath that it happened as alleged, namely, that we displayed our naked person to all present, and of our own free will."

"The bastard!" breathed Suzanne, delivering a savage stab to her sole. "The lying bastard!"

"Quite," responded Avery. "But it was quite plain that Dame Evelyn did not hold the witness in high regard, for McAlastair had been imprudent enough to have a few drinks this morning in order, no doubt, to give himself Dutch courage for the encounter—and it showed. He was also unshaven and, like

Einskattle, dishevelled. By the time Clavery rose to cross-examine, McAlistair's testimony was already tarnished by his manner and bearing.

"You have not met Nick Clavery, Suzanne? No. I should have taken you to see him in his chambers, but it didn't seem necessary. Nick looks like a millionaire-playboy amateur racing driver who enjoys a drink and a pretty face. One could see that McAlastair mistook Nick for one of his sort and was easily led into some fairly damaging admissions as to his character and credibility. Despite the protests of the petitioner's counsel, Nick had soon got McAlastair in a position where he could not but admit that he had been expelled from Eton, sent down from Oxford in disgrace, had two convictions for drunken driving, one for passing a dud check and was an undischarged bankrupt By that time, no one in court—and Dame Evelyn least of all—would have accepted McAlastair's evidence that grass was green without first looking out of the window to check."

"I'm beginning to like Mr Nick Clavery, Q C." said Suzanne.

"It gets better," said Timmy Avery "When Hagan came into the box to give corroborative evidence regarding the event, he was in an even worse state than his friend and predecessor Knowing, as we did, that this witness's past record paralleled McAlastair's, petitioner's counsel then went into a huddle with his instructing solicitor, who went into a huddle with Einskattle, and at the end of it—despite loudly expressed reluctance on Einskattle's part—the issue of the Highland ball was withdrawn from the petition and the witness made to stand down unheard."

"Jock must have been furious!" said Suzanne.

"Audibly so," said Timmy Avery. "Now, what would you like for dessert? Something from the trolley? By jove, I must say that looks very tempting Nothing? Well, my calorie counter tells me I mustn't, either. But perhaps I'll toy with a touch of cheese Stilton Just a bit, please Fine." The waiter having departed, he resumed his narrative

"The next issue, and the last before the luncheon recess, was the matter of your behavior on the homeward bound airliner from Venice."

"What I said, I said," said Suzanne "And there's no denying it. I behaved like a fishwife."

"We are pleading provocation and justification," said Avery.

"Witness for the petitioner was the stewardess in question, one Miss Petula Wormsley, a spinster of this parish, who no doubt was persuaded by Einskattle's instructing solicitor to come forward and give evidence in order to protect her good name.

"Nick Clavery's approach was perfect," continued Avery, "a masterpiece of forensic legerdemain He charmed Miss Wormsley out of her mind: all but asked her for her phone number in the witness box. We had dug out all her background, of course: unmarried mother with two abandoned children now in council care. Seven convictions for prostitution. You would think, wouldn't you, that the major airlines would be more thorough in screening candidates for their cabin crews?"

"Poor kid," said Suzanne, abashed "It's no wonder she went silly in the head about being chatted up by a real live lord. With a background like that, she must have felt like Cinderella."

"Clavery has something of your compassion, Suzanne," replied Avery. "It was beautiful to watch and to listen to Like a conjuror allowing merely the tips of the rabbit's ears to protrude from his sleeve, he gently probed Miss Wormsley about her marital state, past and present Did she have any living relations? Any dependents? What had been her occupation before joining the airline? And not giving her time to reply but passing quickly on to the next question when she hesitated By the end of that stage of the cross-examination, the poor girl must have realized very clearly that by coming into the witness box, she was making herself a hostage to her past At the end of that stage of the cross-examination, the court rose for luncheon I confide that, when the session reopens this afternoon, Miss Wormsley, after taking stock of her position, will have had second thoughts about protecting her good name on the issue of that incident aboard the airliner from Venice. She will recant everything and concede that it was all said in fun And now, Suzanne, if you'll excuse me, I must go Linger over your coffee, but be back at St John's Wood by, say, five-thirty, and I'll give you the news of this afternoon's sitting, which will take in the rest of Miss Wormsley's testimony — and that won't take long — plus the issue of the strange events at the Royal garden party 'Bye " He pecked her cheek

It can't be all so easy, so smooth, thought Suzanne, gazing out of the plate-glass, discreetly draped windows onto the hotel forecourt, to the purring Rolls-Royces and Cadillacs, snarling

Porsches and Maseratis; the sables, mink, ermine, diamonds—the hardware and softwear of the very, very rich It isn't possible that Jock Einskattle's going to let me get away so easily.

There has to be a catch.

Something Timmy Avery's overlooked. Something *I've* overlooked? . . .

Suzanne was making a cup of tea when the phone rang. She fumbled the kettle and scalded her hand in her haste to rush and answer it.

"It's Timmy, Suzanne All goes well, but you'll have to put in an appearance tomorrow."

"Oh, God, that's what I've been dreading all afternoon What happened?"

"Well, as I'd predicted, Miss Wormsley folded as soon as she got into the witness box, so *that* issue was thrown out. The rest of the afternoon was spent in wrangling over what constitutes depravity Dame Evelyn very good-humoredly gave as her opinion that you were to be congratulated upon seducing Einskattle—always supposing that you did in the august surroundings of a Buckingham Palace garden party She pricked the whole argument with a remark that couldn't be disputed. 'After all, it takes two to tango, and the young lady did subsequently *marry* the gentleman!'"

"So why must I come tomorrow?"

"Toward the close of the sitting, the other side started dredging up old scandal column reports on your social life as a student At this the learned judge waved them to silence and summoned Nick Clavery and Einskattle's leading counsel into her chambers. What it amounts to is this unless a satisfactory settlement is made, and the allegations against you retracted in open court tomorrow, Dame Evelyn will see to it that the Einskattle petition is referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions."

"And what does that mean, Timmy?"

"Einskattle could be charged with perjury —and much else."

"I see."

"To Nick Clavery, she gave an instruction that was as near to an order as makes no difference. She wants to see you in court tomorrow, to look at you, to size you up, before she gives her judgment on the petition."

"I'll be there."

"Ten o'clock Make it half past nine. I'll be looking out for

you at the main entrance of the courts. Oh, and wear something not too ostentatious—what am I *saying?* Of course I can rely on your impeccable good taste and judgment."

Cy rang at his usual time. The line from Quebec was like talking through knotted string, but she managed to convey to him that the divorce petition was all over bar the shouting, and would be ended tomorrow. This was fine, she gathered through the crackling and the lacunae, because he was on his way home tomorrow. They managed to convey their mutual and continued love before the line finally gave out on them.

Suzanne spent the rest of the evening in a high state of nervous tension, which Alice was entirely unable to combat, try as she might. When challenged to rationalize her feelings, Suzanne could only reiterate, "I know something's going to go wrong tomorrow—I simply *know!*"

The chimes of St. Clement Dane's church in the Strand were dying on the blustery air as Suzanne got out of her taxi by the great Gothic entrance porch of the Royal Courts of Justice. Timmy Avery was waiting for her in the vast, echoing central hall, where brisk, bewigged barristers floated with gowns fluttering in their wake, anxious-faced litigants trailed along, cheerful tourist rubbernecks gawped and pointed and the closed world of British civil justice busied itself into a new day of expensive argument.

"'Morning, Suzanne. You look wonderful."

He kissed her cheek. She was wearing—mindful of his tactful enjoiner—a perfectly plain gray coat and a beret, with an Hermès scarf as the only touch of color.

"Thanks, Timmy. I feel like Marie Antoinette mounting the scaffold to the guillotine Where do we go?"

"This way " He took her hand and led her down the vast hall, under an arch, up a flight of steps, across a windy courtyard, into another wing of the building, more steps—and then into a long antechamber with doors leading off, each marked with the number of the particular courtroom There were people sitting and standing about. Suzanne looked in vain for Jock Einskattle.

"Suzanne, may I present Nick Clavery? Clavery, this is Lady Einskattle, our client."

"How d'you do, m'lady." Nick Clavery, Q C., was just as Timmy had described him, she thought. the eyes in the handsome, florid face were blue as the ocean, frank and bold From

under the skimpy horsehair wig, his curly black hair poured in reckless confusion. He had the voice—as indeed he had the entire manner—of an old-style barnstorming tragedian. She put him at about forty-five. Very sexy—and knows it, she added to herself.

"How's it going to be today, Nick?" asked Timmy Avery of his colleague.

The other winked. "It's in the bag, ol' boy. Jason's told his client that it's no go and to throw in the sponge."

"Sir Jason Talbot is your husband's counsel," explained Avery.

"You'll be out of here in a quarter of an hour, Lady Einskattle."

"Divorced?" asked Suzanne.

Clavery shook his head. "No go," he said. "The petitioner had a bad case, with the wrong kind of ammunition, and he fought it on the wrong grounds. The petition will be thrown out, but not before Jason Talbot gets to his feet and makes a complete retraction of all the allegations that have been made against you. *And* it'll have to be couched in pretty submissive terms. Your husband's going to have to eat a lot of humble pie, Lady Einskattle."

"He's not going to like that," said Suzanne, and felt afraid.

"He's going to have to get used to it," responded the other cheerfully. "Hello, hello—here we go."

The doors of the courtroom having been opened by gowned ushers, people began to stream in. Suzanne followed after Timmy Avery, who went after his colleague. There was a slight scrimmage at the door as two streams of people met. Suzanne was slightly jostled by a tall figure on her left, who immediately drew back with a muttered apology.

"I'm so sorry, madam."

Their eyes met. It was Jock!

He bent his head in what was halfway to a bow. Released of his gaze, she moved quickly on. She was trembling when she took her seat on a bench beside Timmy Avery. He glanced at her in some concern.

"Are you all right, Suzanne? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I have," murmured Suzanne. "The ghost of the man I married."

Clavery, who was sitting in the bench in front of them with a couple of desperately young junior counsels on his left, turned

and murmured in a stage whisper that could be heard precisely less than halfway across the courtroom, where Jock Einskattle sat in a relative position to Suzanne, "The plaintiff's looking a bit less like an unshaven corpse this morning. Jason tells me he told his client to smarten himself up and lay off the booze last night."

Thank God, thought Suzanne, that I didn't see him yesterday!

To say that Jock Einskattle had greatly changed was oversimplistic. Physically he had scarcely altered: still broad of shoulder, lean of flank, trim of waist. He still carried himself like a Guards officer On the debit side, something, some inner propping, seemed to have been taken out of the man; the straightness of his back appeared to be all a sham, as if the creature within walked with a slouch, shifty, deceitful, a poseur But it was the fine head that had suffered most. It was as if the sculptor who had modeled it in clay had tired of his creation and had let his hand grow careless. The eyes were pouched, the cheeks sagging ever so slightly into jowls at the jawline. And the mouth, once firm and crisply modeled, was now fleshy and petulant-looking

Have I done that to him? Suzanne asked herself.

"Be upstanding in court!" intoned an usher

They all rose as from out of a door at the rear of the chamber emerged a slight figure in red robes, with a wig perched atop of a shock of iron-gray hair. This was the Honorable Dame Evelyn Scrase. She returned the bows of the counsel with a profound one of her own and took her seat in the huge, red-backed chair with its Royal cipher in tooled gold upon the leather She blinked through her heavy glasses, adjusted her wig and said in a surprisingly deep and sonorous voice, "Well, Sir Jason, have you something to tell me?"

"Yes, m'lady, I have." Jock Einskattle's counsel rose to his feet In direct contrast to Nick Clavery, he was spider-thin and tall, fair almost to albino coloring, with a harsh, corncrake sort of voice. He had a trick of putting on and taking off a pair of glasses every time he referred to the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"I'm glad to hear it," replied the judge. She glanced toward Suzanne. "Mr. Clavery . . ."

"M'lady?" Clavery bobbed obediently to his feet.

"Is the respondent Lady Einskattle in court, Mr. Clavery?"

"Yes, she is, m'lady."

"I'm greatly obliged to you."

"I thank you, m'lady."

Suzanne felt the shrewd eyes of the judge upon her and returned the regard. Dame Evelyn Scrase had the look of a schoolma'am, but there was more to her than that, so might Queen Elizabeth the First have searched the countenance of her Admirals Drake, Hawkins, Frobisher and the rest before pricking their names on her list of those to scour the seas for England. And at the end of it, Suzanne was conscious of a wintry smile passing over that enigmatic countenance, a smile so slight, so ephemeral, that all but she in that courtroom may have missed it.

"Please continue, Sir Jason." The glance, and the smile, were gone as quickly as given.

"Thank you, m'lady. M'lady, I have been instructed by my client to submit new evidence in support of his petition. New evidence, whose nature, I submit, is most pertinent to the issue before your ladyship."

"Oh, Sir Jason, Sir Jason!" The learned judge sat back in her red leather chair and closed her eyes in simulated despair. "I had hoped for better than this. I had hoped for a simple yet unequivocal statement from you on behalf of your client that would allow me to dismiss this petition without recourse to further unpleasantness. And yet, despite the taradiddle of so-called evidence you displayed before me yesterday, you are now proposing to produce yet *more* evidence?"

The tall, thin figure seemed to waver before the onslaught, but stayed on its feet. "That is so, m'lady."

"Is it better evidence," asked the judge, "than that supported by Messrs. McAlastair and Hagan yesterday, the latter of which witnesses you were obliged to withdraw?"

"It is, m'lady."

"Better than that of the witness — what was her name? — Wormsley?, who found it of advantage, after a little discreet questioning into her private affairs from Mr. Clavery, to renege?"

"Better by far, m'lady."

"Then I suppose I must hear it, Sir Jason," said the judge resignedly. "Has this evidence been made available to you, Mr. Clavery?" she asked.

"No, m'lady," replied Suzanne's counsel.

"I would add, m'lady," said Sir Jason Talbot, holding up

a brown manila envelope, "that the new evidence has only just been made available to me, this moment, by my client."

The learned judge stroked her cheek, stole a swift glance toward Suzanne. "I think both counsel will see me in my chambers," she said, and got to her feet.

"The court will rise!" intoned the usher.

There was a flurry of movement. The judge disappeared behind her mysterious door and Sir Jason Talbot followed after. Nick Clavery gathered up his papers, grinned at his colleague and at Suzanne.

"One has to concede that dear old Jason gives his clients a run for their money," he said. "It'll be nothing, of course, but will waste another half-hour of fruitless argument." The blue-eyed gaze suddenly hardened, and Suzanne was aware of the man's power. "Lady Einskattle, you don't know, haven't any idea, what this new evidence might be?" he demanded.

"No," whispered Suzanne in great dread.

The ready grin returned. "Well, we shall see," he said, and crossed the court toward the judge's door.

Suzanne sat back and shut her eyes. Timmy Avery's hand closed over hers reassuringly. "Don't worry, Suzanne," he said. "Our conscience is clear. The plaintiff is thrashing around at the end of his tether to justify his petition and get off the hook."

All of a sudden, Suzanne wished that she had not expressly forbidden Alice from attending the hearing: the sight, the touch, the sound of Alice would have served in some regard to quench the feelings of panic that assailed her from all round. And Timmy Avery was no comfort, not with his bland reassurances.

"Don't worry, Suzanne," he repeated.

Her eyes blazed open. "I've plenty to be worried about!" she stormed. The very young barristers attached to Nick Clavery turned their wide-eyed, innocent gazes to regard the source of the sudden outburst.

"I've known all along that something like this was going to happen, Timmy," she said. "I've sinned, you see. And I can't win."

Images of Mummy. Visions of that night in Corfu: the night of her betrayal. Another time: when she returned to her studio to find her pictures and drawings defaced and a quiet corner of her life trampled on and forever destroyed by the same innocent and mindless hand of her child. All the visions of

what Mummy must have suffered on account of—what? On account of having been cursed with a loving, giving nature, with having been joined to a man so much older than herself, and he hideously flawed by experience

We suffer, thought Suzanne, each in his own way, every time round. And there's nothing —nothing— that one generation picks up from the one that went before, for all is rejected by the generation that comes after.

The buzz of general conversation in the courtroom was very far away The press bench was empty, the gentlemen of the fourth estate having zapped out to the phone booths, there to inform their news editors that a new angle was opening up on the Enskattle divorce, and to hold the front page just in case it was something really hot, something from the outfield that could turn a fairly dreary, contested divorce case only lightly enhanced on account of the title involved into a *cause célèbre* And, on the face of it, what could be nicer, more rich in pickings for all the members of the fourth estate, be they common or garden court reporters, trendy editors, or big-time proprietors like Cy Delamere, than a really dirty divorce case?

"Be upstanding in court!"

The learned judge reentered with the two counsels at her heels This was a signal for the newspaper reporters to issue back into the courtroom in some haste

One glance at Nick Clavery's set, grim face was enough to tell Suzanne that all her worst fears were well founded Whatever Jock had dredged up against her was going to stick this time.

Nick Clavery resumed his seat when the learned judge had taken hers He turned round but did not meet Suzanne's anxious eyes, he addressed only his colleague Timmy Avery, dropping a manila envelope into the latter's hand

"I rather fancy that this puts us somewhat at a disadvantage," he said mildly.

The flap of the envelope was open. Out of it, when Avery turned it over, came tumbling half a dozen color prints Suzanne had only to glance at them to register their import

There was herself And Hemstock. Both nude She as he had preferred her with stockings, suspender belt, high heels The pictures — no doubt regarded by Hemstock as the pick of the set and treasured separately — were worse, far worse, than the ones she had recovered from his wallet More explicit by far than those she had destroyed, and they had been bad enough.

What a fool she had been to suppose that the evidence of her sin was wiped away!

She was hideously aware of Timmy Avery's sudden gasp of startled breath, of Clavery's flat, disenchanted stare.

"What—what do we do, Nicky?" asked Avery.

"Ain't an awful lot we *can* do, me ole dear," responded the other. "The pretty pictures tell the story, don't they?" He still did not match glances with Suzanne. "However, let's see what we can make of a bad job."

Suzanne shrank back in her hard seat, and slowly, by easy stages, dared to direct her gaze toward the figure in scarlet upon the scarlet throne. Dame Evelyn Scrase was regarding her, but with none of the implied favor that the slight smile had bestowed; here was Queen Elizabeth the First contemplating the death warrant of Essex, her favorite. Suzanne was the first to look away.

"Proceed, Sir Jason," said the judge in a voice of doom.

"Thank you, m'lady," responded Talbot, rising. "I call Miss Jessie Hemstock."

"Jessie Hemstock—Jessie Hemstock!"

Into the court walked the chambermaid who had witnessed Suzanne and Ian Einskattle together in her bedroom. Hemstock's niece—"our Jessie," he had called her. Debarred from giving evidence because the respondent had admitted her adultery with the petitioner's brother, she was now about to claim her pound of flesh in another role. And the girl seemed to be enjoying the experience: there was a tight little smile of self-satisfaction at the corners of a small, mean-looking mouth.

"Take the book in your right hand and read aloud the words from the card."

"I swear by Almighty God the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Your name is Jessie Hemstock," said Talbot. "You are unmarried and at present employed at the Auchtery Arms inn, Auchtery?"

"Yessir."

"Speak up!" admonished the judge.

"Yessir!"

"Your uncle, your father's brother, the late James Hemstock, was on familiar and cordial terms with you, was he not?"

"Yessir. I 'did' for him."

"You did for him. That's to say you cleaned house for him?"

"Yessir. Every Tuesday and Saturday."

"For which your uncle paid you?"

"Two pound a week, sir."

"Now, Jessie," said Talbot. "I would like to take you back to the Tuesday immediately following your uncle's tragic death. Did you clean the deceased Mr Hemstock's house on that particular date?"

"Yes!" responded the witness with a trace of suppressed excitement "That was when I found the "

"Tell the learned judge, in your own words, Jessie, what happened on that occasion," said Talbot

"Well, I found those pictures in the drawer of his bedside table," she replied "Couldn't believe my eyes. Filthy, disgusting—"

"Miss Hemstock," interposed Dame Evelyn "Confine yourself to answering the questions Please continue, Sir Jason "

"Thank you, m'lady Now, Jessie, I want you to examine the photographs that the court usher is going to give you and tell me if these are indeed the same photos that you found in the drawer " He addressed the judge "M'lady, I should explain that the pictures in question were taken by a patent photographic instrument which develops and prints the image within minutes, and, in common with most other cameras of any quality, has a timing device that permits the user to include himself within the picture The prints before your ladyship, my prints and my learned friend Mr Clavery's prints are merely photocopies of the originals, which are now in the witness's hands."

"I am obliged to your erudition, Sir Jason," said the judge

"Thank you, m'lady Now, Jessie, you've examined the photos In your opinion, are those the same photos that you found in the drawer of your uncle's bedside table?"

"Yessir."

"Why are you so sure? Could they not be copies, like these I hold in my hand?"

"No, sir," responded the girl with a touch of triumph "One of 'em's got a coffee ring on the back, like Uncle must have rested his coffee mug on it, accidental like I noticed it at the time."

"The print in question is marked number five, m'lady," said Talbot "Your ladyship's copy has been printed on double sided photo paper, and the coffee ring has been reproduced there."

"So it has, so it has," replied the judge "What will they think of next?"

"Quite so, m'lady," responded Talbot "Now, Jessie, remember you're on oath. I want you to think very carefully before you answer this question Do you recognize the man in the pictures you hold in your hands?"

Silence. Suzanne could even hear her own heartbeats, and they sounded an intolerable intrusion.

"It's my Uncle Jamie," said the girl. "And the woman, she's ." An accusing finger was directed toward the beautiful brunette seated behind her counsel.

"Thank you, Jessie, that will be all," said Talbot "I have no further questions of this witness " He sat down

"Mr Clavery?" The judge directed her gaze to Nick Clavery, who got to his feet, adjusted his wig, smiled benignly at the girl in the dock and said, "M'lady, this evidence has been sprung on us at a moment's notice I've heard Miss Hemstock's testimony, and very well-delivered testimony, I might add"—another devastating smile for Jessie Hemstock—"but before I cross-examine, I ask for a short recess in order to take instructions from my client."

The judge shifted irritably in her seat "Oh, very well, Mr Clavery," she said. "But this petition, for what it's worth, has already gone on far too long, and I should wish to make my judgment before the luncheon recess."

"As your ladyship pleases," responded Clavery smoothly, bowing.

"The court will rise!" intoned the clerk

"It was blackmail!"

Suzanne made her declaration to her solicitor and counsel in a small, barely furnished waiting room off the court Clavery had lit a thin cigar and had taken a nip from a silver plated hip flask after first offering it to his companions unsuccessfully. He listened expressionlessly as she limned in the bare details of the sexual blackmail that the dead man had imposed on her

"Nick, it's a defense!" cried Timmy Avery.

The other shook his head, took the cigar from his mouth and examined the glowing end. "No go, ole man," he said "If we plead justification, then the last state will be worse than the first. To plead blackmail implies that we held the partner of our adultery in extremely high regard, or that we have something special to hide More exceptional depravity that Hemstock knew about."

He glanced flatly at Suzanne, who lowered her gaze.

"I take your point, Nick," said Timmy Avery.

"The issue of adultery with our brother-in-law is very emotive," said Clavery. "I would say it is as emotive, even, as the damning photographs." Suzanne dropped her gaze. "And that, taken together, the two issues might well give Lord Einskattle the decree nisi that he seeks."

"So, what do we do, Nick?" asked Avery.

"Jason will almost certainly put Einskattle in the witness box to identify his wife from the photos," said Clavery. "Did you say something, ma'am?"

"It—it was nothing," choked Suzanne

"Yes, he'll certainly do that," continued the counsel. "Remember how he choked off little Miss Hemstock when she jumped the gun? He wants the denunciation to come from the outraged husband Well, we must make what mileage we can out of malice Malice on the part of Einskattle, malice on the part of the girl and that's pretty apparent from her outburst at the end Yes, I'm afraid we must accept the photographs with a good grace and plug malice as hard as we can in order to soften Dame Evelyn's feelings toward our client I have a notion that she still might not grant the petition. But she may. It follows that we must then address ourselves to reducing the vehemence of her ladyship's closing remarks upon our client's conduct."

"What he means is that we must deprive the press of the ammunition to destroy you, Suzanne," said Avery, devoted to the last.

Nick Clavery nodded "It has long been the inalienable right of the British citizen to lie in bed on a Sunday morning and titillate himself with scatological reports from the divorce courts," he said "And the righteous indignation he enjoys on these occasions is greatly increased when the learned judge gives the poor respondent some stick, which the press then dutifully reports in the interests of justice If we can instill a little sympathy into Dame Evelyn's by no means stony heart, it might help matters.

"All agreed? Excellent Then let us proceed, for there is much to be done, and Dame Evelyn wants it all over by luncheon. *En avant, mes enfants!*"

"Now, Jessie, you say that you discovered the photos in the drawer of your late uncle's bedside table?"

"Yessir." The girl was perfectly at ease with Nick Clavery,

and why should she not be? She was basking in the sunshine of his smiles and his honeyed voice, and he by far the best-looking man in the courtroom.

"Miss Hemstock," interposed the judge, "one thing is puzzling me. You found these photos a little over a year ago, and this petition has been heard since yesterday. Why have you been so tardy in coming forward with this evidence?"

The mean little mouth hardened into a thin line. "I didna want to soil me uncle's name, ma'am," retorted the girl.

"You did not want to soil your uncle's name," repeated the learned judge, writing. "But you have finally overcome your scruples and done just that. Why?"

"I had to see justice done, ma'am," retorted the witness, in the manner of someone who had been schooled to just such an answer.

"I see. Thank you. Carry on, please, Mr Clavery."

"I'm much obliged to your ladyship," responded Nick Clavery. "Now, Jessie, you have told the court that you 'did' for your late uncle twice weekly. What sort of cleaning did this entail? Did you, for instance, regularly vacuum out the place?"

"Tuesdays," declared the girl. "Always I vacuumed Tuesdays. Uncle was sometimes in on Saturdays," she continued in a confidential tone of voice, as one who is well at ease with her questioner, "and the sound of a vacuum cleaner drove him real mad."

"It has that effect upon some people, myself included," conceded Clavery with a grin. "So, you vacuumed out on Tuesdays. No doubt you dusted? Polished?"

"Dusting on Saturdays, also polishing," said the witness.

"Launderring?"

"His laundry I took away Saturdays and did at the launderette in the afternoon."

"M'lady . . ." Sir Jason Talbot dragged himself with exaggerated weariness to his feet. "Do we have to be submitted to the minutiae of this dead man's household arrangements?"

The judge peered at Nick Clavery over her glasses. "Yes, Mr Clavery," she said. "Are you off on a fishing expedition, or is this stuff all germane?"

"I've one more question only to put to the witness that touches on this subject, m'lady," replied Clavery, still smiling.

"Very well, but make it as brief as you are able, Mr Clavery."

"Yes, m'lady. I'm greatly obliged." The honeyed smile was

switched back to the girl in the witness box. "So, Jessie, let me get this straight in my mind. Tuesdays, you vacuumed out the place. On Saturdays you dusted Also polished. Your uncle's soiled linen you took away on Saturdays to take to the launderette in the afternoon Do I have it right?"

"Yessir " The girl nodded vigorously, cooperatively What terrors does cross-examination hold at the hands of such a man?

The counsel lifted up one slender yet capable-looking hand and enumerated one finger after another. "Tuesday—vacuum Saturday dusting, polishing and laundry " He cocked a quizzical eye at the witness. "Have we not forgotten something, Jessie?"

"Sir?" The girl was puzzled.

"*Upon which day did you habitually rummage through your uncle's private drawers, Miss Hemstock?*" he demanded in a voice of tempered steel

Talbot bounced to his feet. "M'lady, I must object "

"Sit down, Sir Jason!" retorted Dame Evelyn And to the girl in the box, "You will answer the question, Miss Hemstock."

"Well, I I never done-such a thing," faltered Jessie Hemstock.

"You did on at least one occasion," replied Clavery. "On the Tuesday following your uncle's suicide, you searched the drawer of his bedside table and came up with *these!*" He held up the photos.

"I I was clearing up, like," said the wretched witness, almost totally deflated by the duplicity of the man in whom she had reposed such trust.

"Clearing up—hmm." Clavery tapped his cheek with a silver propelling pencil. "Did you figure in your late uncle's will, Miss Hemstock?"

"Pardon me?"

"Did Mr James Hemstock leave you any money?"

"No—he di'n't." Sullenly.

"Did he leave *any* money?"

"Yes, he did!" responded the other vehemently "Left it all to some fancy woman of his in Inverness, more's the shame And me who did for him all those years, ever since I left school and before!"

"As a result of which, out of malice you are here to display evidence which brings shame upon a dead man!"

"M'lady, I do object!" From Talbot

"No, no! It isn't like that at all!" screamed the witness.

"I put it to you, Miss Hemstock, that you are here today to avenge yourself upon your uncle Far from wishing, as you put it, not to soil your uncle's name, you have come here to do just that Out of spite. Out of pique, for not having been favored in Mr James Hemstock's will!"

"No! It isn't like that! You're twisting my words!"

"I put it to you, Miss Hemstock, that your appearance in court today, far from being motivated by a desire to see justice done, more likely stems from pecuniary gain *Who has paid you to produce the evidence of the photographs, Miss Hemstock?"*

"M'lady —I most emphatically object!" cried Talbot.

The learned judge nodded "Yes, you have gone almost too far, Mr. Clavery," she said. "Leave it there. You have made your point."

Sir Jason Talbot contrived to recover lost ground from his opponent's assault. During his reexamination, he received the tearful assurances of his witness that she had produced the evidence in a spirit of righteous disinterestedness, an assertion that was not believed by anyone in court, from judge to lowly usher. Nick Clavery sat and listened to it all, and upon his face was the bland smile of a cat that has not only scoffed the cream but has also got away with it.

"I call the Earl of Einskattle!"

Jock Einskattle walked, ramrod backed and every inch the Guardee, to the witness box but stiffly, like an automaton To Suzanne, watching him, with his arms folded and his blonde, leonine head held high, her husband was, oddly, not a fearsome but a tragic figure Apart from the lack of inner substance that she had immediately discerned that morning, there was something in his glance, in the luster of his eyes, that suggested—*what?*

Madness?

"You are John Errol Percy Machinish Forbes Machahinny Einskattle, Thirteenth Earl of Einskattle in the Scottish Peerage?" asked Talbot.

"I am."

"Residing at Castle Einskattle, Scotland?"

"Correct."

"Lord Einskattle, will you take in your hands the set of photographs which the court usher is giving you? And will you

study them all carefully till you have established in your own mind the identity of the two persons featured in those photographs?"

Einskattle did as he was bidden, shuffling the pictures through several times, his face told nothing as he laid them aside on the edge of the witness box.

"Lord Einskattle, who is the male party in the photographs?"

"My former bailiff, the late James Hemstock."

"And the female in the photographs?"

A hooked, malevolent glance was directed toward Suzanne. It reached her with the force of a blow.

"My wife. Lady Einskattle."

"Thank you, m'lord." Talbot sat down

No more smiles or honeyed tones. Clavery got to his feet and went straight into the attack.

"Lord Einskattle, I put it to you that the production of these photographs in this court damns you as a cad and a scoundrel!"

"M'lady!" Talbot was quick to intervene.

"Yes, Mr. Clavery," said the judge "It will in no way help your case to abuse the petitioner."

"I'm sorry, m'lady," said Clavery; but his smile was quite unrepentant And he was able to observe that his thrust had struck home: the eyes of the man in the witness box had taken on a demented gleam, and the muscles of one cheek were visibly twitching.

"How did you come by these photos?" he demanded of the petitioner.

"From the Hemstock girl," came the reply

"How much did you pay her for them?"

"M'lady!" from Talbot.

"Yes, Mr. Clavery, you will withdraw that question!" said the judge.

"I withdraw the question. Here's another, my lord. You formerly held a commission in a famous regiment whose name we will not sully by mentioning in this court. Why were you obliged to resign that commission?"

The question, predictably, drew a protest from the petitioner's counsel on the grounds of irrelevance, and Dame Evelyn had her doubts. "Mr Clavery," she said, "it will not be sufficient merely to discredit the petitioner as you have so successfully discredited his witnesses The issue of the photographs remains and simply won't go away, not if you were to establish

that the noble lord is the greatest cad and scoundrel in the land. Please continue—but bear that in mind."

"Thank you, m'lady," said Clavery with no discernible contrition. And, to Einskattle, "I am waiting for your reply!"

"I—I resigned my commission for personal reasons."

"Would it not be more accurate to say that you were *obliged* to resign your commission because your debts had assumed such scandalous proportions that you had no other course?"

"That is not so!" cried Einskattle.

"Ah, so it was not because of your debts, then, that you were obliged to resign, but for the *other* reason?"

"I don't know what you mean!" The tic in the plaintiff's cheek had increased alarmingly.

"Does the name Doreen Brown mean anything to you?"

"Perhaps," came the guarded reply.

"I will refresh your memory. Doreen Brown, wife of Corporal Alan Brown of your former battalion, fell pregnant in January of last year and procured an abortion. Shortly after that, Corporal Brown was arrested in barracks on a charge of drunkenness. He was apprehended while screaming abuse outside the window of the officers' mess. The burden of his abuse was that you, Lord Einskattle, had fathered a child upon his wife. Is that true?"

The declaration caused an outburst of comment in the courtroom, which was quickly quenched by the judge and the ushers. Under cover of the disturbance, several reporters dashed out to telephone their papers with the latest development, in the pious hope that their editors would dare to print the allegation.

"I am waiting for your reply, Lord Einskattle," said Clavery. "Did such an incident occur?"

"There was something of the kind." The admission was spat at the questioner.

"Was Corporal Brown's accusation true in essence?"

"No! It was a damned lie! I never laid hands on the frigid bitch!"

The outburst, delivered in a rising scream, reduced the courtroom to a silence that hung in the air like a bad smell. The learned judge gazed for some time at the figure in the witness box, then laid her pen down on the desk before her, carefully aligning it with the edge.

"I put it to you," said Clavery quietly, "that this was not the view taken by your commanding officer. How else was it

that Corporal Brown was not court-martialed but given only a nominal punishment and not reduced in rank? Whereas his *noble and gallant officer*"——Clavery gave the term a cutting edge of venom "was prevailed upon to resign his commission!"

Einskattle was past hearing. Staring, he beat upon the edge of the witness box with both fists.

"Lies, all bloody lies!" he screamed. "I never got near the slut, for all her sluttish ways. She was useless—useless! Niminy-piminy lower class, mealy mouthed . . . just like my bloody wife!"

"I've no further questions of this witness," murmured Nick Clavery, casting an expression toward the destroyed figure in the witness box that held compassion, and perhaps a touch of remorse.

Chapter 3

Suzanne, after the judgment was delivered, went straight by taxi to Albany, rejecting Timmy Avery's offer of companionship. On the way there, she saw the early evening editions on the streets with the placards reading EINSKATTLE DIVORCE—RESULT.

Letting herself into the apartment with her own key, she made herself a pot of China tea and sat sipping the austere, straw colored brew and turning the events of the day over in her mind.

The dramatic collapse of Jock Einskattle under cross-questioning had served as an anticlimax to the proceedings, for he had without much argument been prevailed upon by his lawyers to quit the court, which he did in a most unbecoming manner, with his solicitor supporting him on one side and a junior barrister on the other. Head bowed, mouthing an incomprehensible liturgy of hatred, the lord of Castle Einskattle was led out like a criminal being taken to the gallows. Or a lunatic to an asylum.

She closed her eyes. She supposed that Nick Clavery's merciless wounding of his witness was justified, since Jock had had no compunction in bearing false witness against her and, when all else had failed, producing the damning photographs. Despite which, in the end it had all rebounded upon his own head.

What had been the judge's phrase, the saying she had quoted that encapsulated the law's stand? "He who comes to equity must come with clean hands"—a principle enshrined in justice since the days of the Romans. By his relentless pursuit of his wife and the attempted destruction of her character by perjured

witnesses, said the judge, the plaintiff had destroyed his own case and had forfeited the sympathy of the court The issue of two acts of adultery aside, she continued, the allegation of "exceptional depravity" did not hold water The petitioner's hands were not clean, so let him not look to the court for succor. The petition was dismissed Lord Einskattle would not profit by his strategems.

As for Lady Einskattle . . .

The wise eyes behind the thick lenses had softened strangely when they had turned upon the beautiful creature sitting, frightened and quenched. behind her counsel

"As for the respondent, I have heard the outburst—one might almost say the frenzied tirade that her husband delivered against her from the witness box of this court. Expressed in violent and brutal terms, it did not suggest the creature of exceptional depravity that he alleged in the petition but rather a partner who was unable to match his own excesses. I must say that I find Lady Einskattle as much sinned against as sinning."

Eight o'clock . . .

The Quebec flight was scheduled to arrive at Heathrow at five Surely he would have come straight here, even though they had not arranged to meet at Albany The obvious thing would have been for him to come straight here, dump his baggage and phone her at Alice's place, or to get his chauffeur to dump the baggage at Albany after dropping him at Alice's. Either way, she should have had a phone message from him by now.

The usual anxious doubts intruded. plane late, plane crashed, plane taken over by hijackers, Cy lying dead on a mortuary slab, or laid out in a row in some remote field in Ireland or someplace, covered with a blanket

She snapped on the radio in time to catch the news bulletin There had indeed been another hijack, but in the Far East, the Queen had canceled all engagements for the week on account of a cold, and the American Secretary of State was visiting Cairo Nothing about the divorce case Nothing about a plane crash.

She phoned Alice's flat and received no answer She phoned Cy's Fleet Street office and was told by the duty night secretary that the latest they had on Mr. Delamere's movements was that

he had indeed caught the plane from Quebec, which had departed on time.

At eight-thirty, she heard his key in the lock and ran to greet him. He turned to see her running in her stocking feet across the parquet, her arms outstretched, and was ready to receive her. Mouth to mouth, hands and arms embracing through an infinity of time, they stood there.

"It's been so long, so long And I thought you were never coming!" she whispered.

"The plane was late," he said "We were stacked for an hour over Heathrow. I rang Alice, but there was no reply. It never occurred to me that you'd be here But, oh, how glad—"

"No explanations! Take me, darling—*take me!*"

The plain gray dress that she had worn for the court was falling about her hips. She had already removed everything from under it.

They lay together on a high plateau of half-fulfillment, having mounted hand in hand through the foothills of delight and onward to the tangy kiss of the snowline that thrills the flesh and sets the skin a-prickle, so that merely to suffer the touch of one's lover is to experience something between the lightest brush of a butterfly's wing and the application of a white-hot iron. Beyond and above all that, they had found their consummation in a triumphant duet for two bodies in unison And now lay, half-awake, half-dozing; fingers entwined, nude bodies lightly joined. Blissful.

"You are the most beautiful man I have ever known, or known of," she whispered "The ancient Greeks brought you to perfection, and Michelangelo had you before his eyes when he created the ceiling of the Sistine chapel."

"You are a revelation to the mind of a man," he responded, lightly touching her navel and sketching a line upward between her breasts to her throat "For every time you unveil yourself, the sight of you far outstrips the recollection of the previous time, so that you become more ravishing on each and every occasion There never was perfection like this, hips and thighs like these, breasts like these." His gentle fingers described the objects of his adoration, and her very soul tingled to the touch "And to think that you're all mine, my Suzanne "

"All yours," she whispered against his lips "And only yours."

Together, they resumed their ascent to the ultimate peak of ecstasy.

She borrowed his dressing gown, but knotted it round her hips at his request, leaving her breasts bare as they been in the Islands. While Cy lay like a pasha, she produced champagne and caviar from the refrigerator, and they sipped and nibbled together on his great bed between kisses and caresses, between sweet talk and lovers' talk, in the most delicious intimacy. Inevitably, sadly, the outer world intruded.

"So Linskattle lost his petition," said Cy. "I read it in the evening edition."

"If he'd won, we'd soon be free to marry," she said.

"Not at that price," he said. "Not at the price of my girl being branded as a slut and a slag. We can wait our time, my love."

No mention of the damning photographs. Timmy had assured her that they would not be reported in the press, but was it possible that Cy would never hear about them? She ached to question him, but a whole world of loving and needing prevented her.

"That was the first thing that greeted me when I landed," said Cy. "Your good news. Then there was Timmy, to tell me that the whole takeover business is hotting up, and that Wessex-Seabright is putting on the pressure again. It's all out in the open now. Barefist knuckle fighting and no holds barred. An ad hoc committee of our minor shareholders has hired a hall in Westminster and is staging a 'Get Rid of Delamere' meeting on Thursday. It's a put-up job, of course. I smell the delicate fingers of Nadia Nielsen. But she's wasting her time. Wessex Seabright is wasting its time."

"How so?" asked Suzanne, stroking the line of fine hairs that stretched downward from his navel.

"I'm making a takeover bid for Wessex Seabright," he said, grinning.

"Oh, Cy—you *can't* be serious!"

"Darling, I've never been more serious in all my born days. It's become a matter of kill or be killed. The idea came to me out of the blue on the way over to Canada. I put out a few feelers when I was there and was overwhelmed with support. The paper-making consortium, who know which side of their bread is buttered, are one hundred percent behind us. With that

kind of backing, I can buy and sell Wessex-Seabright and send La Nielsen to a nunnery. Why are you laughing?"

"It just struck me as rather droll," she said. "Sister Nadia, the pride of the nunnery."

He frowned. "She isn't going to like it," he said. "She's bucking for chairmanship of Wessex-Seabright, and with the kind of hole-in-the-head talent they carry on the board, she could walk it. If I ditch her chances, I'd better watch out. She'd likely take a contract out on me."

Suzanne gave an involuntary shudder and hugged her breasts. "Darling, don't say things like that," she pleaded. "Don't even *think* things like that. That Nielsen woman gives me the creeps, and though you mean it in jest, I happen to feel that she's quite capable of taking her revenge by getting you killed."

"I might put the boot in first," he replied "There are plenty of operators around. You'd be surprised, Suzanne, how many high-flyers in big business and politics don't *really* have heart attacks at all, and don't *really* get accidentally drowned while scuba-diving off Marbella." He drained his champagne glass and drew her close to him, slipping one hand round her unbelievably slender waist and with the other tugging away the knot that secured the dressing gown about the rich roundness of her hips. "Oh, by the way, I quite forgot "

"Forgot what, darling?"

Cy reached out to where his coat and pants lay draped over a chair by the bedside and produced an envelope. "Note for you from Timmy," he said. "Isn't important, and you're not to bother to reply. Is there any more champagne, darling?"

"I think so," she said, and went out of the bedroom, deliberately putting on a slightly swaying walk; conscious, deliciously conscious, that her lover was regarding her every move and adoring every aspect of her nude body.

She brought a bottle out of the refrigerator and opened it with devastating expertise After that, she slit open the envelope and read the contents.

Dear Suzanne,

Thank God it went off well. I don't know if you appreciated the finer points of his performance, but Nick Cravery can certainly be said to have snatched triumph out of near disaster.

Einskattle has been determined to pursue you to the

bitter end. Back at the office, I got wind that he had sent copies of the photos to every news editor in Fleet Street. Not that they could possibly print them, or even refer to them save in the most oblique terms, but they would have given the hacks in Fleet Street bars and drinking clubs something to snigger over.

But do you know what? Every single set of those prints has been returned to my office by special messenger. And I have destroyed them. Who says that dog eats dog? Who says that Fleet Street is lacking in basic integrity? Even the *Courier* sent *their* copies!

Yours ever,
Timmy

P S My best information is that Cy knows nothing about the photos No doubt you will wish to keep it so You may rely upon my help—as ever.

"What happened to the champagne?" bawled Cy from the bedroom "Are you still treading the bloody grapes?"

"The grapes I have trod, and the wine's coming along real fine," replied Suzanne.

This is another burden I must bear, she thought the dread that he'll one day learn about those photos, perhaps overhear some Fleet Street hack snigger about them in some bar,' like Timmy said Perhaps even see a set of them And Jock won't have spared any expense or effort in pushing them around Well, I've put my hand to the plow and I must go on with it One thing's for sure I could never survive if Cy set eyes on those pictures From here on I shall be living from one day to the next!

She set a match to Timmy Avery's note and watched it burn up in the kitchen sink, then ran the tap and swilled away the black ash.

Would that all our black sins and transgressions could similarly be washed away from the sight of others

"Darling!" His cry from the bedroom

"Coming!" she called back, picking up the bottle of champagne.

"What would you best like to do tonight?" he asked her

"Stay here in bed with you and do what we've been doing all evening," she replied without any hesitation

"Suzanne, I'm being serious."

"So'm I being serious. How much champagne have we drunk?"

"Two bottles. Don't change the subject Listen: I'm offering you a set of options as to what we could do tonight, and you must take your pick. The choice is yours, and yours alone "

"I so love masterful, power-crazed men," she said, deliberately spilling wine from her glass across his chest and proceeding to lick it up "Do you like that, darling? Does that drive you crazy, like when you do it to me?"

He was not to be moved. "The options are. one, seats are booked in the stalls at Covent Garden for tonight's performance of *Tristan und Isolde*. You don't appear to be over the moon at the notion."

"I think we do it so much better than some blowsy soprano and a tenor in a tight corset," she said.

"Out with *Tristan und Isolde* Next option. a ball at the Duchess of Tweedsmoor's place in Piccadilly, in honor of her daughter Lady Ann's engagement to the Excelentissimo Señor Visconde de Galha, and I hope I've got the accent and pronunciation right. I do not see the light of enthusiasm being kindled in the eyes of my little bird "

"Your little bird," said Suzanne, "is quite flat about that "

"Or—we could fly out to Tahiti, to the *Joseph Conrad*. We could take the wings of the morning."

"Oh, Cy, Cy! If only *we could!*"

"We can, and we will, my darling—if that's what you wish."

"But, Cy, what about the takeover bid? All your problems?"

"They're no longer my problems, they're Nadia Nielsen's problems, and her board's. The lights will be burning all night in the Wessex-Seabright building, you bet, for the news of our offer is already out. Not to worry. Timmy Avery can deal with the nuts and bolts."

She shook her head in delight and bewilderment "Tonight? Now?"

"Tonight Now. The tickets are waiting for us at Heathrow."

"Darling, you wonderful, wonderful man You had it planned all along And the stage management was divine "

"We are not without our talents," he said, pulling her lovely nude form closely to him. "And it did seem to me, darling, that you need a holiday after what you've been through "

The divorce . . .

She remembered the divorce, and with it came the recol-

lection of the hazard in which she now stood in regard to the man she loved. So that an expedition to the South Seas became on the instant doubly desirable.

It was not likely that anyone was going to buttonhole Cy in Papeete, or anywhere else in the Islands, and hand him a set of photo prints that described her shame in searing detail.

It was a midnight plane. They dined at the Ritz, and a chauffeur driven limousine from the firm picked them up at eleven o'clock and drove them to Heathrow. For luggage, Suzanne had thrown a medley of casuals into a single hold all. ("After all, darling," said Cy, "you seldom wear more than a sarong on the boat, and invariably with your bosom bare.") Alice was out with Mr. Morley, so she left a short note and forwarding address to a shipping agent in Papeete. They arrived at Heathrow in good time for check in. The place, at that time of night, was half dead: nothing but the drone of a bored voice announcing arrivals and departures, the twinkle of automatic indicators, the bored eyes of the people at the check-in counter. Three men in macintoshes were waiting by the departure gate.

The senior one of the three stepped forward and addressed Cy.

"Mr. Delamere, sir?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

"I'm a police officer, sir. Here is my warrant card. Would you mind accompanying me? I'd like a word with you in private."

"Of course," said Cy calmly. He took Suzanne's arm. "I don't know what this is all about, darling, but it can't take long."

They were led to a door marked Airport Security Room. Inside was a plain deal table and a few chairs, a poster informing all who cared to know that Smoking Can Seriously Damage Your Health and a warning about the illegal importation of animals and the concomitant hazard from rabies.

"Well, officer?" asked Cy.

"My name is Detective-Inspector Angel, sir," said the other, "and I have a warrant for your arrest on suspicion of murder."

He spoke with a West Country brogue, Devon or Cornwall, with the rolling r's, the slow speech of the hills and the craggy coast. Suzanne watched him, petrified, struck suddenly dumb with shock and disbelief.

"I must caution you that you're not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so, but what you do say will be taken down in writing and may be given in evidence."

No taking the wings of the morning for Suzanne and her Cy. Blind to the scudding traffic, the shifting lights, the swish of the taxi's windshield wipers, she stared ahead of her and tried to encompass the horror of the last hour.

Murder!

They were indeed from the West Country, from Cornwall, and were even now taking him back to their duchy in a police car that had brought them to London—and no question of allowing Suzanne with them. They allowed her a few moments to say goodbye to him in private. He had kissed her tenderly, told her everything would be okay and to contact Timmy immediately, have him phone the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary and be prepared to travel down to the West Country first thing tomorrow. And, no, she, Suzanne, had better keep out of it at this stage.

She had rung Timmy Avery at the airport and had reached only his answering service, she had left no message. Alice, also, she had phoned, but Alice was not back home and was presumably staying the night with Mr. Morley.

She went back to Albany, to the tumbled bed, still warm from their cavorting bodies, to the empty champagne bottles, the dirty glasses, pot of caviar, crumbs everywhere. And wept anew.

She tried Timmy again and still got only the answering service, this time she put over the message as Cy had given it. And then, worn out with nervous fatigue and suffering still from *la lassitude de l'amour*, she lay down in her clothes upon the tumbled bed and went to sleep.

The bleeping of the phone awakened her. The light was still on and the time was five-thirty. Streaks of early dawn were trailing gray fingers over Mayfair garden walls.

"Suzanne!" It was Timmy.

"Thank God for you."

"I've been to an Old Boys' dinner that went on longer than it should have. Anyhow, I've already got the matter sorted out as best I can. Cy's committal proceedings will be held in a magistrate's court this afternoon, and I shall be there to represent him. No, there's no point in your coming down. It's

only a preliminary hearing and might take only minutes. The police will certainly have further inquiries to make and will ask for him to be remanded into custody."

"Remanded into custody! Does that mean jail?"

"I'm afraid so, Suzanne. Bail's seldom if ever granted on a murder charge."

"But Timmy, Timmy —who's he supposed to have murdered? They wouldn't even tell me that. Just bundled him into a car and drove off with him into the night."

"He's charged with the murder of Alastair Hudd, Suzanne."

"Hudd? The man who—"

"His biographer. They guy whose car went over a cliff in Cornwall last year in rather odd circumstances. The police case is that it wasn't an accident, but that Cy engineered it."

"But how have they got around to such a crazy idea?"

"They say they're acting on information received."

"*What* information, Timmy?"

"That I shall find out when I get down to Cornwall and read the detailed charges and statements of prosecution witnesses, if any."

"But who *gave* this information to the police?"

"That's a good question, Suzanne. And I might not get an answer to that one."

She remained at Albany throughout the morning so as to be near the phone. In the forlorn hope that by some means Cy might be permitted to contact her, she never strayed far from the instrument. She ran from the sitting room to the kitchen when she made herself a cup of coffee lest it should ring and not give her enough time to snatch up the kitchen extension. By eleven o'clock, her nerves were in such a state that she tried one of Cy's thin cigars, but it only made her feel sick and dizzy. At eleven-thirty, she poured a gin and tonic and promised herself it would be her last before sundown. At shortly before midday, the phone rang.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Nadia Nielsen," came a cool voice from the other end. "Do I address Lady Einskattle?"

Suzanne met her reflection in the mirror opposite and saw in her gamine, shocked expression something of what the cool and amusedly contemptuous Nadia Nielsen must have seen near the lake in Buckingham Palace Gardens when she drew aside

the branch of weeping willow and stared into the face of Suzanne Garbisian.

"Yes," she said in a voice that sounded unlike her own.

"I think it would be of aid if we were to meet," said the other woman. "Today. Say, in an hour. A little less."

"Of aid? I don't understand."

"Of aid to Cy. I have a proposition to make. A proposition of help in his—present plight." There was a note of amusement in the voice that grated against Suzanne's nerve ends like fingernails dragging down a brick wall.

"Where?" she said. "Where do we meet?"

"Cocktail bar at the Ritz? Say a quarter to one?"

"All right."

The phone went dead.

A wind of autumn blew down Piccadilly, carrying before it the leaves of paper and trees, somebody's straw hat, a child's toy ball. Suzanne went in through the revolving doors, ducked past the porter, who did not recognize her in dark glasses, slacks and a trench coat.

Down in the cocktail bar, Nadia Nielsen was already settled on a sofa in a quiet corner. It was not a busy day

"What would you like to drink?" she asked "Come and sit down beside me."

Suzanne ordered a negroni; Nielsen had another dry Martini. She was svelte as a panther in a short black wool jacket with black velvet collar and dramatic diamanté buttons over a black silk blouse, frivolously ruffled at collar and cuffs, and a black velvet full skirt, topped off with a hat of black velvet. Made up to perfection, she looked as unlike a hard-line top executive as was possible to imagine. A movie actress of the first magnitude, perhaps, or the wife of a South American millionaire, or both.

"Your very good health," she pledged Suzanne with her recharged glass.

"What do you want to see me about?" asked Suzanne bluntly

"About Cy," said the other. "About this case they've brought against him in Cornwall. It's going to stick, you know."

"You seem to be well informed," said Suzanne.

The eyes, deep green and only slightly inclining to gray, peered at her from over the rim of her glass. "I laid the information," came the reply "I should know the strength of the case."

Suzanne took a deep breath and exhaled it, slowly and with great deliberation. She was now in the front firing line of her lover's defense This woman had said she wished to present a proposition to help Cy. For that, she, Suzanne, would gladly walk through fire and sup—or take drinks—with the devil. For all that, for all the obvious need to remain on civil terms with the bitch, there did not seem any point in beating about the bush.

"Why did you lay the information?" she asked.

The green eyes opened wide "Need you ask?" said Nielsen. "I've had the means to do it for oh, six months or more. I had a hunch about Hudd's death and put a very good private eye on the job He came up with the goods, and the goods is what the local police are throwing at Cy right now."

"You did this because of the takeover," said Suzanne. "Because he's making a bid for Wessex-Seabright?"

"Of course," replied the other, smoothing down the flaxen purity of her hair, severely dressed into a chignon à la Eva Perón. "I am quite ruthless, my dear. Cy—now he's an international tycoon of the very first order, none better. But he lacks the ultimate quality of a dictator, which is the determination to fight to the death I have no such scruples. Cy's proposed takeover of Wessex-Seabright will set me back to square one if it succeeds, I've no illusions about that. Cy has no plans for the furtherance of Nadia Nielsen's career. So"—she snapped her fingers —" I must destroy him before he destroys me."

"Did Cy murder Alastair Hudd?" asked Suzanne.

"No," responded the other. "But he might just as well have, considering the evidence, which, though wholly circumstantial, will almost certainly have him committed to the Crown Court, with a better than even chance of a conviction and a life sentence And even if he gets an acquittal in the end, the takeover will have failed, for the Canadian paper consortium will have dropped him like a hot chestnut the moment the magistrates commit him to the Crown Court for trial "

After a few moments, Suzanne brought herself to ask again, "If you've got it all figured out, why did you want to see me today?"

"I had a hunch that we might do a deal," said Nadia Nielsen, carefully placing a cigarette in an onyx holder and lighting it. She took a puff and exhaled smoke through her finely chiseled

nostrils. "It occurred to me that you might persuade Cy that there are better fates than doing a life stretch, which, with the best of good luck and full remission, has to be twelve years Twelve years is a long time in a man's life, my dear. It'll be a long time in yours, also."

"But how, if you've laid this information - which, as you say, is purely circumstantial but will almost certainly convict an innocent man—before the police, are you in a position to bargain?" asked Suzanne. "What deal can you possibly offer?"

"There's another piece of evidence I *didn't* give the police," said the other. "Something else my private eye turned up that would put Cy in the clear I'm ready to offer it—for a consideration."

"Cy has got to withdraw from the Wessex Seabright takeover?"

The green eyes blazed fire. The reply came through narrowed, venomed lips. "Better than that!" Nielsen breathed. "He's also got to agree to Wessex-Seabright taking over his United Kingdom holdings!"

"He'll never go along with that!" cried Suzanne

The other smiled archly "He'll agree if you ask him, my dear," she said. "Don't underestimate your hold over the susceptible Cy—I don't You play upon those twelve, empty, fruitless years. Suggest lightly, of course that as a hot-blooded, passionate woman, you can't be expected to remain celibate during the best years of your life He'll go for it Men catch on quickly where sex is concerned And Cy has read about your former track record in the gutter press!"

With difficulty, Suzanne restrained herself from striking that smooth, sneering, impeccably lacquered face

"If you were to provide the evidence to set him free," she said, "I would move heaven and earth to persuade him to do as you demand, even though I might lose him in the process, even though it would be in his worst interests "

"My, you really have gone overboard for him, haven't you ?" said the other. "Okay, we have the beginnings of a deal But I shall need some collateral Call it an insurance policy that you won't double-cross me, that you won't let Cy double cross me, just as soon as the new evidence has sprung him."

"What is this insurance policy?" asked Suzanne

The other woman smiled. "Have another drink, my dear," she said. "Waiter—same again."

When their drinks were brought, Nadia Nielsen pledged her younger companion by raising her glass and smiling enigmatically. The green eyes flashed with something other than spite, and a pointed pink tongue moistened the scarlet lips

"Your very good heath, Suzanne Here's to our deal."

"To the deal," breathed Suzanne

"When I first met you," said Nielsen, "at that appalling, third-rate function at the palace, you stood out from all the rest of the young women there. It struck me that you were very artistic I've seen some of your pictures since, and I admire them very much Artistic people are tremendously sensitive. I, too, am artistic Creative Though my creativity takes other forms I thoroughly mastered binary mathematics while still at kindergarten, and for a party piece can do quite difficult calculations instantly, right off the top of my head Try me Give me a five-figure number and I'll give you its square root just like that!" She snapped a faultlessly manicured finger and thumb.

Suzanne, bemused at the turn the conversation had taken, and uncomfortably aware that the other woman had moved closer to her on the sofa so that their hips touched, delivered the first number that came into her head

"Five-four-three-two-one."

"And the square root of that is . . ummm . two-three-three, point zero-six-eight. How's that?"

"Marvelous." How else to reply?

And then, Nadia Nielsen leaned forward, and, before Suzanne could guess what she was about, kissed her full on the the lips.

Eye to eye, she murmured huskily. "I have also got an extremely beautiful body And I'm very good in bed."

"How super for you," responded Suzanne, appalled.

"Darling," said the other "Don't play hard to get It's such a bore You ve slept with other women, the propensity's there. I can see it in your eyes. I saw it right from the first, when we met at that ghastly garden party I'll be very gentle with you Very caring Not all your men partners, or the women, either, will have pleasured you so beautifully " Her slender hand stole inside Suzanne's trench coat. "Do you have long nipples?"

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact " Suzanne shrugged aside and firmly buttoned up her coat "So that's the insurance policy, I take it? I go to bed with you. And in the event of a double-cross, you'll betray me to Cy. Do I nave it right?"

"Darling, it can be a secret between us. Who wants anything but pleasure? If all goes well, no one will tell How about it?"

Suzanne got to her feet. Nielsen's hands reached up and took the younger woman's hands in hers. The well groomed blonde head was cocked slightly to one side, the gray eyes candid, no trace of corruption on that bland, lacquered countenance.

"There's no hurry, darling Give it some thought, do Ring me any time, day or night. I'm in the book We could have such fun. We could be real, loving friends."

"Goodbye," said Suzanne. "I'll think over your proposition Thanks for the drinks."

She went. Outside in Piccadilly, the air seemed curiously cleaner, the sky brighter than it had been before. Burying her chin into the high collar of her trench coat, she set off back at a brisk walk to Albany by way of Burlington Arcade

Timmy rang her at five-thirty He sounded despondent.

"I'm calling from Cornwall," he said. "Cy sends his love and is in good heart. It went as expected. The police put up minimal evidence and asked for remand into custody till a week from today."

"What's their case against Cy?" she asked

"Basically that he met Hudd at a pub some distance from Hudd's mother's place. They had some kind of a quarrel that was overheard, Hudd went off in his car with Cy following after. Up on the cliff road, so it's alleged, Cy drove alongside Hudd's car and bumped it off the road and over a two-hundred-foot precipice into the Atlantic. That's the story, and there are some pretty nasty little bits of corroborative evidence that tie in, particularly since Cy has admitted that he was close behind Hudd's car when it went over the cliff – it would have been fatal to deny it, of course And, naturally, he's pleading not guilty."

"Nadia Nielsen informed against him," said Suzanne.

"The devil she did!"

She told him of her interview in the bar of the Ritz, omitting the attempt at seduction.

"I've said to Cy all along," declared Timmy when she had finished, "that Nadia has inculcated the Wessex-Seabright board with her philosophy of fighting dirty, with no holds barred You know Cy. He's a big man, a ruthless man, but he fights to Queensberry rules in the clinches. The guys against him,

led by Nadia, play it as dirty as hell! And what do you suppose is this piece of evidence, this last piece of the jigsaw puzzle that will get him off the hook?"

"If Nadia Nielsen's private eye can find it, surely we can," said Suzanne. "Or *our* private eye can "

"You're right!" declared Avery. "Tiplady's our man! I'll bring him round to see you tomorrow "

Mr. Tiplady was tall, lugubrious, wore an oversized fedora hat that wobbled upon his domed head and which he seemed reluctant to remove on entry into the apartment. The reason was revealed to be a ginger scratch wig set atop his pate that would not have deceived a blind man on a galloping horse at fifty paces. He had on a pair of very large brown boots that Alice regarded with some dubiety, mindful of Cy's priceless Persian carpets Alice, upon learning that her "darling girl" was deeply in trouble again, had absented herself from the supermarket and from Mr Morley and had installed herself in at Albany as Suzanne's maid.

Suzanne offered Mr. Tiplady coffee He asked for tea and poured four heaped spoonfuls of sugar into his cup before their astonished eyes.

"Mr Tiplady has done a lot of work for me in the past," explained Timmy Avery "In the profession he's known by the title of 'the Ferret'—and it's by no means derogatory."

The private detective, cup and saucer balanced precariously on his knee, blushed gracefully. "Always at your service, Mr Avery, sir," he said "If you will be so kind as to outline the case, I will proceed immediately "

"Regarding the newspaper reports at the time of Hudd's death," said Avery, "there were the usual discrepancies of reportage, the most important being that Hudd didn't drink that night at the village local but at a pub some ten miles away along the cliff road, and met Cy Delamere there by prior arrangement So much for that What has since been unearthed and laid before the police is that the two men had an argument in the bar There are two witnesses who will testify to this in court."

"Why did they not come forward at the time of Hudd's death, sir?" asked the private detective

"For the simplest possible reason," said Avery "Hudd was unknown to them, and when his death was reported the fol-

lowing day or the day after, they simply didn't connect him with one of the men in the bar But they remember the incident because of Cy Delamere, whose face struck them at the time as being rather familiar, like someone's they'd seen on TV. That establishes Delamere's presence, which he doesn t deny, nor does he deny following Hudd's car away from the pub; but he didn't see him go over the cliff. There are, however, some rather nasty sticking points. He hasn't satisfactorily explained why he registered in a local hotel under an assumed name or how the car that he had used for the occasion sustained damage to the front nearside wing consistent with being struck by, or striking, the wing of another vehicle "

"Nasty one, that, sir," opined Mr Tiplady

"Very nasty," responded Avery "That's the broad outline of the police case Our client is pleading not guilty and probably giving evidence on his own behalf. I would say that the case is likely to go on to the Crown Court. Unless you can come up with something new, Tiplady."

"There *is* something new," interposed Suzanne And gave the private detective a brief outline of her meeting with Nadia Nielsen.

"The committal proceedings go before the local magistrates again on Thursday," said Timmy Avery "Do you think you'll deliver the goods by then, Tiplady?"

The domed, bewigged head nodded "If this fresh evidence has been unearthed before, sir," he said, "and by a member of my profession, be assured that it will be unearthed again by Tiplady."

With this portentous pronouncement, he drank up his tea, put on his hat and departed for Cornwall.

The next few days passed in a limbo, with the apartment the heart and center and the telephone the umbilical to the outer, hostile world. Timmy Avery went down to Cornwall on Tuesday to consult with his client, for as a solicitor he had, of course, the right of audience in the lower court, and he had decided to represent Cy before the magistrates and to leave Nick Clavery and his big guns for the Crown Court hearing—should it come to it Avery rang her every day of that week of waiting, and always with encouraging noises. From Cornwall, he was able to tell her that he had seen Cy, and Cy was well and sent his love, that they had definitely decided that he

should go into the witness box and give evidence on his own behalf. And, no, he had heard nothing from Tiplady, who had gone to earth somewhere in darkest Cornwall.

With the telephone within reach of her hand, Suzanne was greatly tempted many times—particularly at night, when resolve is at its lowest ebb, and in the early hours before dawn—to pick up the receiver and call Nadia Nielsen, to agree to her terms in full; to give herself to the woman in return for Cy's freedom. But always she refrained, not from regard for her own feelings but from an instinctive hunch that Nielsen was not to be trusted—that, even if everything went her way, the woman would still have Cy informed that they had gone to bed together—and that out of sheer venom.

Alice was her sole comfort. Upon Alice's bosom she rested her head at night. And when she was wakeful, which was often, Alice would put on the light and distract her with reminiscences of the old days, of the good times: times in Corfu or in Egypt, when Daddy had not been around and Mummy had been at her best, of Christmases remembered for the simple pleasure of giving and receiving; of laughter and sunshine.

On Wednesday night, she traveled down by air to Cornwall for the hearing.

The town was bypassed by a new trunk road that had restored the place to something of what it had been before the days of the internal combustion engine. The gray slate roofs, the uncompromising granite walls, the distant man-made mountains from the clay pits did nothing to soften the landscape, over which the stark, bare moor forever brooded under its shifting pall of mist. And the sea a gray ghost afar.

Timmy was there to greet her at the hotel, where he had booked her the one and only suite. He was optimistic and encouraging as ever, though she did not miss that his eyes were tired, his fingers, even when in repose, constantly turning to fiddle with something.

"I think we shall go to the Crown Court," he said. "And that won't be such a bad thing. The police have cobbled together what amounts to a pretty watertight case. But circumstantial, of course, and it may not convince a jury."

"But, surely, Timmy, if Cy is committed for trial, the Canadian paper consortium will desert him," said Suzanne, remembering Nadia Nielsen's summation.

"They've done so already," said Avery glumly. "We might

win them back if the case is thrown out by the magistrates today; but as of now, the takeover bid for Wessex-Seabright is on ice."

"Nothing from Tiplady?"

"Tiplady has simply disappeared Oh, by the way. Suzanne, I've received a nod and a wink from the police that there'll be no objection to your being present when I confer with Cy during the luncheon recess today."

"Oh, to see him again! Tell me, Timmy, is he—does he seem worried about the outcome?"

"Well, you know Cy, Suzanne He'd not show it if he were worried out of his mind. As it is, he bears himself like what he is and like what he professes to be an innocent man wrongly accused."

She met his glance "Timmy, I could never doubt that Cy is totally incapable of committing a brutal and cowardly murder. Is that truly what you also believe?"

His reply came straight away "Yes, it is, Suzanne Trouble is, it's his word, and his alone, against the assembled circumstances—unless Tiplady comes up with something today "

The courthouse was a one-story modern building surrounded by an extensive parking lot. Timmy Avery and Suzanne arrived there by taxi a quarter of an hour before the proceedings were due to start. The presence of a scattering of sightseers should have provided a clue, but it was not till Avery had paid off the taxi and they were mounting the steps to the courthouse door that a murmur in the crowd alerted them to the arrival of a police van that drew up at a side door

"It's Cy," said Avery.

Cy Delamere got out of the rear of the van accompanied by two uniformed constables. At least, it had to be him because of his height and the same suit he had worn at the time of his arrest. There was a coat thrown over his head and the policemen had to lead him through the doorway For the first time, Suzanne was conscious of the distance that lay between them. he was a man accused and alienated from society till society had either found him innocent or taken its retribution for his guilt.

Timmy Avery squeezed her arm "Chin up, dear," he said. "Come on, let's get it over with."

The principal courtroom was a sizeable chamber with a row of elevated seats for the three lay magistrates who would hear the case, fronted by desks for the clerks and other officers of

the court Timmy took his place near the front of the court, with Suzanne seated behind him Lawyers, clerks and all were in sober dark suits, men and women both, no scarlet and ermine, flowing gowns or wigs in this, a lower court

"Be upstanding in court!"

The sound of widespread scuffling behind her told Suzanne that the seats were now packed with spectators, come to watch and hear the enactment of a murder case, surely not a very common event in rural Cornwall

Cy not having yet appeared, she had eyes only for the three persons who would be his judges that day two men and a woman The latter was a typical well bred country housewife, dressed in tweed skirt and woollen twin-set, with a single string of good pearls and the sort of hat that one associates with fishing or deer-stalking, gray-haired and fiftyish with a kindly but shrewd look about her The senior of the trio, who sat in the middle, must have been well into his sixties and had ex military written all over his pouched, weatherbeaten face and its clipped, tobacco stained moustache. It was the third member who seized Suzanne's attention Younger than his colleagues — in his late twenties, early thirties — he had the trendy appearance of some one in the media industry, or perhaps one of the new-style school teachers or polytechnic lecturers, with his straggling hair, Zapata moustache, granny glasses A rebel and, since the lay magistracy are political appointees, clearly from that part of the political spectrum that would take its stand on the opposite side of the barricades from his colleagues The turtleneck sweater, the jeans and the zodiac charm that hung about his neck on a chain were a challenge to conformity On which side of the barricades would he regard Cy Delamere, international tycoon and, saving the present day's proceedings, well set for becoming an honorary knight of the Bath?

"Put up the prisoner!"

Cy was brought in through a door behind the dock by his police escort The last of the South Pacific tan had faded from his cheeks He looked to have lost weight, and a patch of sticking plaster on the angle of his jaw told that he had cut himself while shaving that morning. His eyes sought Suzanne, and they exchanged smiles.

"Your Worships, I appear for the prosecution My name is Taylor My learned friend Mr Avery appears for the accused . "

Taylor was small and neat, with a deep, cornerake voice

and the cold look of a born disputant who would hold on till the death to the last rags of his argument Suzanne feared him on sight.

Taylor outlined the prosecution's case to the magistrates and went on to submit his evidence in support. First into the witness box was Mrs. Charmian Hudd, widowed mother of the deceased man. She was a woman of indeterminate age, with hair carefully set and hennaed, a good complexion and well modulated voice She was dressed—appropriately—in mourning black: black coat and skirt, black beret. Mrs. Hudd testified that, till she had been told of the evidence against the accused—this accompanied by a sharp glance of bitter hatred toward the tall figure in the dock—she had no suspicion whatsoever that her son had been the victim of anything other than an accident He had gone out that evening for a drink, as was his habit when he stayed with her, and he had not returned. That was the sum total of what she had to offer. The hate-filled glance aside, she struck everyone—Suzanne included—as a basically kindly person, and not overburdened with intelligence.

The next witnesses for the prosecution were the landlord of the Shoreborough Arms public house, the hostelry where it was alleged that Delamere and the dead man had had their drink and quarrel, and one of his regulars, who had been the only other customer in the public bar Together with the landlord, he had overheard snatches of angry exchanges coming from the lounge bar beyond a glass screen.

Fragments of these exchanges were drawn from the witnesses by Taylor's careful questioning.

"Damned if I will—I'll see you dead first!" was alleged to have been said by the accused.

"Then the thing will go through as it's written!" or words to that effect, spoken by the deceased.

The argument, said the witnesses, continued as the two men were going out to the parking lot The deceased's car had driven off first (the brazen note of the high powered sports car had been unmistakable), followed by that of the accused And yes, both went in the same, westerly direction along the cliff road

There followed, in the cases of both witnesses, the identification of the two men concerned one as the prisoner in the dock, the dead man from photographs.

Next came the foreman of the motor pool at Cy's firm. He testified that he had supplied the accused with a loan car on the date mentioned and had found, upon its return on the fol-

lowing day, that the nearside front wing had been crumpled. And no, Mr. Delamere had offered no explanation for the damage.

The last witness for the prosecution was the manager of a St. Austell hotel who produced a register in which the man in the dock had written himself in as Mr. Michael Davis, of Tite Street, London.

Finally, the accused's own sworn statement to the police was read out.

That was the case for the prosecution. Taylor did not fudge the issues by making any further pleadings to the bench but sat down with a gleam in his eye that echoed the thought that no trio of lay magistrates were going to sling *that* out the window, they would vote to hand the hot potato over to the higher court to sort out.

"Mr Avery, what has the defense to say in answer?" inquired the senior magistrate, he of the military bearing.

"Your Worships," said Avery, rising to his feet, "my client, pleading not guilty, opts to take the witness box and answer the allegations before Your Worships."

"Take the book in your right hand and read aloud the words on the card . . ."

Cy, his pallor and the strip of sticking plaster notwithstanding, cut an impressive figure in the witness box, with his fine bearing, his air of gravity, the steady glance that swept round the courtoom and returned to the figure of his lawyer standing below him.

A few courteous preliminaries, and then, "Mr Delamere, will you tell their Worships, in your own words, why you traveled down to Cornwall in a firm's car on that occasion to meet the deceased?"

Cy nodded. "I'd heard from Hudd that he was going to prepare a revised, second edition of my biography . . ."

"That's the book entitled *And Not to Yield*, which had some considerable success?"

"Yes, it went into three printings immediately after launching and was made into a movie." Suzanne's heart turned over at his familiar, wry grin. "Not a very good movie, I'm afraid."

"Go on, please. You say that the deceased was going to prepare another edition of the book."

"That s right. Hudd wanted to include some new passages that I thought unsuitable. He persisted that it would give the book an entirely new dimension and bring it back onto the best-

seller charts again. I was dead against it, but finally I agreed to meet him down in Cornwall, where he was at that time living with his mother."

"Why did he not travel up to London to see you?"

"The question never arose I proposed to come down here "

"I see. In your statement, you say that you drove yourself down to St Austell and registered there under the name of Michael Davis, giving a false London address Why did you do that?"

"I frequently use an alias when I'm traveling around Put it this way: I'm halfway to being a famous face If I walk into a hotel bar or restaurant, folks mutter to each other, 'Isn't he somebody?' That's bad enough, but if they ever get wind of one's name, they make the connection. I prefer anonymity when I'm traveling around."

"That's very reasonable," said Avery. "And the Fite Street address?"

"That's an accommodation address owned and maintained by my company for the use of visiting firemen as you are in a position to know very well, Mr. Avery."

The two friends exchanged grins.

Avery said, "It was suggested by the prosecution that the choice of the Shoreborough Arms public house for a rendezvous instead of the deceased's local had some particular sinister significance What is your comment on that?"

Cy Delamere shrugged "It was Hudd's idea I suppose he didn't want to discuss business where he'd likely be buttonholed by someone he knew and held in conversation all evening."

"It was a matter of simple prudence?"

"Sure."

"Now, it has been stated in evidence that the discussion between you and the deceased grew somewhat heated Was this so?"

"Just a little. Hudd stuck to his point that the new inclusions would revitalize sales of the book I stuck to mine that they gave a false slant to the basic narrative. We agreed to differ "

"Did you say, as given in evidence, anything like 'Damned if I will—I'll see you dead first'?"

"I may have It's the sort of strong expletive that slips lightly off my tongue when I'm aroused "

"But quite meaningless?"

"Of course."

"Two more points, Mr Delamere. In your statement, you

say that you followed Hudd along the cliff road but did not overtake him. Can you amplify that for the benefit of their Worships?"

"Yes. Hudd went on ahead, driving like the clappers. I never saw him again. I realize now, of course, that I must have passed the spot where he went over the cliff only minutes earlier, but there was nothing to indicate the accident. The road's unfenced along that stretch."

"So you knew nothing of the accident till you read about it in the press?"

"That is so."

"A final point, Mr. Delamere. It is alleged that upon your return to London, there was found to be on the firm's car some damage that was consistent with having struck, or having been struck by, another vehicle. What is your explanation for the damage?"

"I found it next morning when I went to fetch the car out of the hotel garage. Some clown must have swiped the wing on his way out and driven off without reporting it."

"What was the state of the car when you put it away the previous evening?"

"Unmarked. The garage was well lit. I couldn't have missed seeing that kind of damage."

"Thank you, Mr. Delamere," said Avery. "Remain in the witness box, please."

He sat down, turned and smiled at Suzanne. She returned the smile. Surely everything was going to be all right now. Timmy's bland questioning, Cy's logical and reasonable answers had seemed to make mincemeat of the prosecution case which, it had to be admitted, had sounded as hard as rock when unchallenged. And here was that dangerous looking little man Taylor getting to his feet to cross question the witness, as he was entitled.

His first question, delivered in a quiet voice, brought a gasp from the crowded courtroom and sent a stab of fear through Suzanne's whole being.

"Mr. er. Delamere, I put it to you that your statement to the police and your testimony here today is, in substance, a tissue of lies from beginning to end!"

"Not so!" was Cy's stout reply.

Taylor fiddled with the sheaf of papers in his hands for a few moments till the court ushers had silenced the hubbub.

Like a leading actor with a series of punch lines, he was not going to risk their being lost by the yakking of the groundlings.

"Mr. Delamere, you are an American citizen and an international businessman of high repute?"

"As to the first, yes. As to the latter, that is a matter of opinion."

Cy was not to be put down, he was quite unflustered.

"You have also served your country, and with some distinction, as a fighter pilot in the late war?"

"I served my country, yes."

Pause.

"Does the name Edward Hyde mean anything to you, Lieutenant Edward Hyde?"

"Ted Hyde was in my squadron. He was killed."

Suzanne drew a sharp intake of breath.

"You knew him well?"

"He was my friend."

"I put it to you, Mr. Delamere, that Hyde was also *your lover!*"

Chapter 4

Pandemonium in court. Timmy Avery on his feet and protesting to their Worships that the question was out of order, not being related to the issue; Taylor countering that the issue of the accused's private life was relevant, suggesting, as it did, a motive for the crime. The magistrates clearly out of their depth and being advised by a nervous and jumpy learned clerk to allow the line of questioning, advice that was stalwartly accepted by the youngest of the three magistrates and finally by his colleagues.

"Please continue, Mr. Taylor," said the military gentleman.

"Thank you, your Worship," responded the other. "And now, Mr. Delamere, I will not press you to answer my last question, but I put it to you that the substance of the so-called 'new passages' that Hudd proposed to include in the second, revised edition of *And Not to Yield* concerned your relationship with Lieutenant Edward Hyde, together with some letters—I hesitate to call them love letters—between Hyde and yourself that had come into his possession. Will you comment on that?"

Answer, my darling, answer! prayed Suzanne. Every moment that you hesitate, every moment you remain looking down at your hands instead of standing four-square to the winds, you forfeit credibility in the shifting, fickle morass of this courtroom!

Presently, Cy said, "My friendship with Ted Hyde certainly formed the basis of Hudd's revisions to the book, yes."

"And you objected to their inclusion. Why?"

"Out of—delicacy."

Taylor sneered. Someone in the back of the court gave a snigger. "Out of delicacy for your own reputation?" suggested the questioner.

"Out of delicacy for the reputation of a dead man," replied Cy, "who lies in an unknown place, and whose reputation might have been tarnished by the common ruck of people who have no knowledge, no concept, of the truth of our relationship. Out of delicacy for Ted Hyde's surviving relations, his mother and father, brother and sisters, who might suffer from the calumny that would follow the publication of Hudd's revisions. That's why I opposed them."

Well answered, my darling. But, oh—the questions you've prompted in my heart!

Taylor, visibly taken aback by the unwavering directness of the witness's reply, tried another tack

"You say, in your evidence and in your statement, that you didn't overtake Hudd's car on the cliff road. Did you attempt to do so?"

"I'd have had my work cut out," replied Cy "And him in a Lotus sports car and going like all hell."

"Are you a good driver, would you say?"

"Fairly good."

"Fairly good? You do yourself less than justice, Mr Delamere You were a wartime fighter pilot, with a pilot's swift reactions, his keenness for speed. And have you not, in fact, been a racing driver?"

"That's putting it a little high, sir," responded Cy. "I've entered a few sports car races in club events. That's a whole different ball game from Grand Prix racing "

"Did you win, Mr. Delamere?"

"I won a couple of times."

"You won a couple of times. I put it to you, Mr Delamere, that given a winding, narrow cliff road that would put the odds in favor of the driver's expertise rather than on the performance of the car, and given that a Ford Cortina is by no means a slow or underpowered vehicle, and given that Hudd, all unsuspecting, was making no attempt to prevent you from seeming to be about to overtake him given all these conditions, it was the simplest thing in the world to bring your car alongside the Lotus and, with the Atlantic Ocean beating against the cliffs far below, to edge your car toward his "

"No!" Cy Delamere beat the rail of the witness box "That's not true!"

"I further put it to you, Delamere, that you have lied to this court That, being blackmailed by Hudd, you resorted to murder in order to prevent him from uncovering your past homosexual

relationship with Edward Hyde and exposing you to hatred, ridicule and contempt!"

"It's not true." Cy shook his head, again and again.

"In his examination," said Taylor, "my learned friend omitted to ask you one question—very conveniently omitted, some might think—that I shall now put to you. Why, upon later hearing of Hudd's death, did you never communicate to a single soul that you were the last person to see him alive? Indeed, in your own version of the occurrence, you were only minutes behind him when he died. Answer me that!"

"I—I . . ." For the first time, the accused's voice faltered.

"Why, Delamere – why did you shirk the issue? Was it not because you had everything to conceal by your silence?"

Answer him, Cy! Answer him! pleaded Suzanne in her head

Presently, Delamere looked up. "Hudd didn't blackmail me," he said. "His interest lay in making money—a lot more money than he'd already made out of the book. To do that, he was willing to pillory Ted Hyde. Me, also yes. But mostly Ted. I never liked the guy, never liked Hudd, not from first to last After my meeting with him in that pub that night, when he insisted that he was going through with his plan for the revised edition, I would have wished him dead. When I heard the news next day, I said to myself, 'Well, you've killed yourself, and good riddance!' I washed him right out of my mind."

"Oooooh, oooooh!"

An unearthly wailing filled the court Turning to follow everyone's glance, Suzanne saw the dead man's widowed mother with her hands pressed to her face, shaken by bitter sobs A court usher went to her, took her by the arm and gently led her out of the chamber.

"I wished him dead," repeated Cy Delamere, "but I had no part in his dying " He seemed to be directing the words to the grieving woman.

It being twelve-thirty, the senior magistrate ruled that the court should rise for luncheon recess. Cy was taken out by the way he had come in Suzanne and Timmy Avery waited till the courtroom was empty, then faced each other

"That was a dirty one that Taylor pulled on us," said Avery

"Did you know it was coming?" she asked

"No. Neither did Cy, or he would have told me It never crossed his mind, I'm sure."

"Where does that leave his case?"

"In a somewhat worse state," said Avery. "On paper, at least. A strong motive has now been provided."

"Thanks to Nadia Nielsen!" said Suzanne savagely.

"Oh, undoubtedly. God knows how she came by it all. I shall get a transcript of those letters that Taylor referred to and see what sort of case we now have to answer. But I tell you one thing, Suzanne . . "

"What's that?"

"If he's committed to the Crown Court, before a jury of ordinary folk like you and me, I hope for his sake that he answers up with the dignity, gravity and obvious sincerity that he showed today."

She squeezed his hand. "Let's go and see him," she whispered.

It was engineered with the great delicacy that informs the ordinary British policeman at the most unexpected moments. Upon their arrival at the sealed-off part of the court complex reserved for accused on remand, Suzanne and Timmy Avery were admitted into a lobby with several doors leading off. There were the two policemen who had escorted Cy to court, and one other, a stout, middle-aged sergeant. He was carrying a tray draped over with a napkin.

"Just taking in Mr. Delamere's lunch, sir," he informed Avery.

"I'll have a few words with him when he's eaten," said the latter, glancing meaningfully at Suzanne.

The tray was thrust into her hands. The wink that accompanied it was as broad as the wild moor of Bodmin that could be seen through the barred window.

"Happen you'll loike to take in the gennleman's lunch, miss," said the sergeant in the accents of the wild West Country.

"Thank you," she replied.

When she entered the narrow room beyond, Cy was standing with his back to her, looking out of a narrow, barred window. He turned upon hearing her come in.

"Suzanne!"

"I've brought your eats," she said lightly. "Wonder what they've given you?" She put the tray upon the table, avoiding his eye, and took away the napkin. "Sandwiches," she declared. "And, if I'm not mistaken, ham sandwiches."

"With plenty of very strong English mustard," he said. "Just the way I like them, as you know. Brought in from the pub

down the road by my good friend the sergeant, who took my order as soon as I arrived here His name's Tregannon, and that's a good old Cornish name for you "

"Cy," she said brokenly, "I've no idea what to say to you—*and it's never been like this with us before!*"

"My dearest—my girl!"

Then she was in his arms.

"Tell me all about it—please!" she murmured against his cheek.

"Right, I will," he said, releasing her "Sit down, and you shall hear all, no holds barred. Straight up."

"About Ted."

"About Ted. This is a kid of nineteen, going on twenty One of the best combat pilots in the group. Father a two-star general and a family military history going back to Bunker Hill. One thing, however, mars this young guy's life he's known from adolescence and before that he's a homosexual and doesn't like it So what happens? He thrusts it out of his mind, works his butt off to make his father and family proud of him —and is on the way to destroying himself in the process, so that he throws himself into combat against whatever odds, just to prove himself."

"And gets shot down in flames in the process," supplied Suzanne "And you saw it happen?"

Cy, who had been pacing the floor before her; paused, whirled round and faced her. "How did you know that?" he asked.

"You dream about it," she said "Twice in *my* hearing. You call out warnings to him, telling him that an enemy's on his tail, telling him he's on fire Calling to him to eject "

He passed his hand across his brow "God, is it like that?" he asked.

"Just like that, Cy. Just like that."

After a while, he continued "That was the time he was killed There were other times Two aircraft were shot from under him in three months, and as many written off as soon as they landed With that kind of punishment wrecking duralumin and steel, what does it do to the insides of a man? Ted wondered why he was cracking up mentally and physically and put it down to the fact that he was a sissy That was the word he used sissy, which is what some of the kids had called him long ago in school when he realized, in that penetrating way that kids have, that he was different

"I tried to reassure him, show him that courage—real courage—has no regard for sexuality, quoted him the Greek soldiers at the pass of Thermopylae, who braided their hair and oiled their bodies, who kissed each other before they marched forward to the enemy and certain death. I tried to show him that courage is not the sole prerogative of the heterosexual ethic Urged him to take his long-overdue furlough and relax on his laurels for a while."

"And did he, Cy?"

"He did not. Oh, Suzanne, how often, when we try to help others, do we only help to encompass their destruction? Ted's response to my well-intentioned advice was to seize upon me as a substitute for his father, whom he revered, but in whom he could not confide, and fall in love with me.

"He wrote me letters· outpourings of his sad, deprived heart, which the stupid, the insensitive, the plain malicious would have sniggered over in dark corners. I wrote back to him, thanked him for reposing so much trust in me, assuring him of my continued friendship, urging him, still, to take that furlough and rest his mind and body It's that exchange of letters, Suzanne, written over a period of about three months and sketching the account of that entirely platonic friendship between a youth and a very much older man, his superior officer, that somehow Alastair Hudd got hold of and wanted to incorporate in the second edition of the book. He likened our relationship to that of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas; indeed, he intended to title the relevant chapter 'The Love That Dares Not Speak its Name' —a quote from the Wilde Trial "

"Did you love him, Cy?" It had to be asked

He nodded without hesitation "As a father would love a son. As an older man would love a brave kid in the flower of his youth. As any man would love another, who, with every virtue to commend him and everything to live for, is walking with open eyes to his early death.

"I couldn't stop him, Suzanne. To add to all the guilt he had amassed, there was now also the need to win *my* approval What I had done was to set the certain seal upon his death "

He covered his face with his hands

"No more, Cy," she whispered to him, embracing him, drawing him to her breast.

"I've never spoken of it to anyone," he said. "But I shall tell you now, Suzanne. It was a routine patrol over the delta Six of us, me leading, with Ted my wingman. It was he who

spotted the enemy flight and was away in pursuit even before I'd given the order. Together, we made two passes. One of theirs went down, then one of ours. I was getting in position for a deflection shot when I saw my right wingtip disappear in a show of sparks and junk. I did a turn, and this Mig went past over my head, with Ted flying on his tail, hammering away. As the Mig broke off and went into a spin, I saw this other guy coming in at Ted from behind. I yelled to him over the radio to break off. But . . ."

Suzanne held him more tightly.

"I was too far away. The wrong height. Facing the wrong direction. All I could do was watch . . ."

"No more, my darling. No more!"

"He caught fire almost at once. I saw him turn the ship on its side and slip-stream in an effort to put out the flames. Then I guess he must have tried to eject—but the system must have been shot up. He never came out. Never . . ."

"Enough, enough!" she whispered.

"He must have fallen five thousand feet, straight down toward that wide brown water of the delta, burning all the way in his duralumin coffin. Would you believe, his radio worked right to the end, and it was switched to transmit. I heard him . . ."

"No, Cy—*no!*"

"I heard him go insane all the way down those five thousand feet, while the fire burned at his body. And then . . . and then his ship blew up in a fireball and it was all over. The bits and pieces just drifted on down to the delta. The smoke . . . his funeral pyre—cleared away. A man was gone."

There then began a paroxysm of grief that Suzanne did not have it within her to check, even if she wished, when a strong man bowed like a sapling before the gales of his bitter memories, bent, was shaken, but did not break.

The storm over, and she continuing to hold him to her, Suzanne summoned up all her resolve and said, "Now I'll tell you something I've kept locked in my own mind all these years, something that's cankered me inside and made sleep a thing I actively fear.

"My mother, married by arrangement to an older man she didn't love, bore only one child by him, and that was I. By someone else, she had a boy who died young, and whom my own father condemned to her as a bastard when the little body

was not yet cold. Years of seeking an outlet for her warm and giving heart brought only misery upon my poor mother, as a procession of gigolos, scroungers, pretty boys and wastrels went in and out of her bed, serving no purpose but to increase her desperation and, further, to alienate her from my father. Two suicide attempts should have acted as a warning, but they went unheeded. I think it's likely that a third attempt would have been for real and would have succeeded. But fate lent a hand—a cruel hand—to remove my mother from her misery.

"It was at a house we had leased in Rome. Daddy was away. I had been sent early to bed. Mummy had gone to a ball at the Quirinale Palace, a brilliant affair to which she went in a gown of *tissu d'or* and which she displayed to me before she left, pirouetting like a girl, beautiful as a ballerina, proud and happy with her loveliness.

"I never saw her alive again. I only saw . . ."

He looked into her eyes and saw the remembered horror there. He would have stopped her till he realized that the need to tell it was as urgent as his own had been. He withdrew his finger, which he had gently laid across her lips.

"I woke in the night and smelled smoke," she said. "Alarmed, I got out of bed and went out onto the landing. In the moonlight from the hall windows, I could see it billowing down from the floor above, where my mother's suite lay, black, rolling clouds of smoke. It was a wonder that the servants had not been wakened by the reek of it.

"I almost knew then, and I relive it every time in the nightmare, that I was going to be too late. But I ran up the wide, marble stairway, and through the smoke cloud, choking against the acrid burning in my throat, to my mother's door.

"In the nightmare, sometimes, I find the door locked, and I spend anguished moments trying to wrench it open. At the time, I was able to push it open quite easily. With it came a rush of heat and a great gusting of smoke that half-cleared the room, and, by the light of the great chandelier hanging from the center of the painted ceiling, I could see it all . . ."

"Tell me, my darling," he whispered. "Purge yourself forever."

"The bed, my mother's bed, and its great gilded canopy, and the hangings of golden velvet, were charred to crumbling. Lying in the middle of it, stretched out like an obscene blackamoor doll, was the part-consumed figure of what had once

been a ballerina in a ball gown of *tissu d'or*, with a blackened skull that grinned white teeth at me

"My mother, you see, smoked in bed."

Sergeant Tregannon unlocked the door soon after, and with him was Timmy Avery.

"Cy, the court will be resuming again in a quarter of an hour," said the latter, "and I must speak to you about our tactics." He looked irresolutely at Suzanne

"I'll go and leave you to it," said she, squeezing Cy's hand "Be with you in court, darling."

As she walked out, she heard the sergeant chiding his prisoner for not eating his ham sandwiches.

It was warm and sunny outside, and a break in the clouds above the moor brought out the subtle colors of tumbled rock and gorse, couch grass and sedge Out in the fresh air, she unpinned her chignon and shook her hair free so that it flowed in a sable mane over her shoulders

Free . . .

How strange, how ironic, that both she and the man she loved beyond life should find the curious chemistry of release in such an unpromising place as the cell of a remote country town magistrates' court. Paradoxically, she supposed she would treasure the memory of the place for always And it was curious, now that she had heard all the truth from his lips, that she no longer had any fear for him Let them send him to trial, no jury would convict a man, let the evidence against him be more conclusive by a hundredfold, who could speak the truth with such ringing conviction.

To hell with Nadia Nielsen and her poisoned bait! The bright cutting edge of truth was all that was needed to slice through the tissue of chance and circumstance that enmeshed the prisoner.

And yet, and yet . . .

It would have been fitting to have freed the prisoner in this place and at this time rather than endure the long weeks—perhaps months—of waiting for the trial in the higher court, with Cy kept in jail.

As she turned these things over in her mind, she walked with no thought of the direction she was taking, out of the courthouse perimeter and onto the road that ran downhill into the town. At the bottom of the hill were the station and a row of waiting taxis A single figure was plodding slowly up the

hill toward her, a big hat nodding with every step he took with his big brown boots, long arms swinging vigorously with every stride: the gait of a man who does a lot of walking and holds it to be a good exercise She recognized him on the instant.

"Mr. Tiplady!" she cried.

Like so many very tall men, he stooped slightly and walked with his eyes fixed upon the ground a few yards ahead of his advancing feet. At the sound of her voice, he looked up. A set of over-large false teeth flashed a grin of recognition. An elongated arm was raised in greeting.

She could not wait. She broke into a run, calling as she went.

"Mr Tiplady, have you—*have you found anything?*"

He answered her with the forefingers of his raised hand extended in a V for victory.

"Be upstanding in court!"

The magistrates shuffled into their places and sat down The prisoner was brought up. Mr. Tiplady had taken a seat beside Suzanne, and behind Timmy Avery, who was rereading the sheaf of papers that the private detective had given him only a few minutes previously Over his shoulder, Suzanne could see that the writing on the sheets was in a large, careful and untutored hand, laborious, plodding—the epitome of the author.

"Mr Taylor, have you any further questions to put to the accused in the witness box?" asked the senior magistrate.

"Thank you, no, your Worships," replied Taylor, bobbing to his feet. "That is the case for the prosecution." He said it with an air of "and let you three rank amateurs and your learned clerk fail to send the case up to the Crown Court at your peril!"

"Mr Avery, do you wish to reexamine your client?"

"No, your Worships," responded Timmy. "But in view of some fresh evidence that has just been put into my hands, I should like to recall the witness Mrs Hudd "

Taylor's nose went up like a ravening fox who has just been disturbed in the act of rending his prey.

"What evidence is this, Mr Avery?" asked the Bench

"Your Worships, it relates to the state of the deceased Alastair Hudd at the time of his death. The issue is pertinent—and brief "

"Mr. Taylor?"

'No objection, your Worships." Taylor shrugged.

The widow Hudd was recalled to the witness box, having spent the recess lying down in a quiet room reserved for those who were overcome by the rigors of justice. She blinked nervously at Timmy Avery when he gently reminded her that she was still under oath.

"Mrs. Hudd, was the deceased, Alastair Hubert Hudd, the only issue of your marriage to the late Thomas Henry Hudd?"

"We—we had a daughter," replied the woman. "She died when she was six, poor little mite."

"A tragedy. I'm sorry to distress you, Mrs. Hudd, but of what did the child die?" And, seeing Taylor rising with exaggerated weariness to his feet, he added, "The answer is relevant, your Worships, as will become almost immediately apparent. Please answer my question, Mrs. Hudd."

"Rheumatic fever." The answer came almost in a whisper.

"Rheumatic fever. Your Worships, this is a disease which is commonest in children between the ages of five and fifteen, in which even survivors sustain a variable amount of cardiac damage. I have here an affidavit from an esteemed medical practitioner setting out the pathology of the disease. You will observe that rheumatic fever frequently occurs in more than a single member of a family, and there is a strong presumption that there is a hereditary susceptibility factor." He turned back to the woman in the witness box. "Mrs. Hudd, did any other member of your family suffer from rheumatic fever?"

"Alastair—he had it when he was twelve."

"Your son Alastair had it when he was twelve. And he recovered. Now, tell me, Mrs. Hudd—was that the end of it?"

"He's had a lot of heart trouble since."

"He's had a lot of heart trouble since. Your Worships, I have an affidavit from the medical practitioner who was treating Alastair Hudd up to the time of his death. Stripped of professional terminology, it states that scar formation caused by the disease had resulted in a deformity of the valves of the heart, and that the patient had had several of what the layman would call heart attacks. Is that so, Mrs. Hudd?"

"He was very poorly once or twice."

"I see. Your Worships, the last document I offer as evidence is the proposal form for car insurance filled in by the deceased last January twelvemonth, in which in answer to the specific question 'Does the applicant suffer from any organic malfunction which might render him incapable at any time?' Alastair

Hudd replied in the negative. Mrs Hudd, did your son confide in you that, considering the state of his health, he had obtained his obligatory car insurance by making a false declaration?"

"What if he did?" The woman blazed indignation and the stubborn intractability of the basically stupid. "He didn't have a lot of fun out of life, being ill on and off ever since he was a boy. Why should he have been deprived of his sports car? It was his whole life!"

"It was also his death, Mrs. Hudd," responded Avery quietly. "One's only consolation is that he didn't take anyone else with him No further questions, your Worships." He sat down.

The magistrates were in a huddle The trendy young one was having his say: vehemently pointing out the starkly obvious. His colleagues were nodding vigorously in agreement. Prosecutor Taylor was resignedly stuffing his papers into his briefcase and checking with his watch to see if he had time to catch the next train home

The circumstantial evidence surrounding Cy Delamere had melted like snow before the sunlight of the principle that a man's guilt must be proved *beyond all reasonable doubt* The doubt lay in the evidence that Mr Tiplady had produced at the eleventh hour: the question mark that would forever lay across the death of Alastair Hudd, whose remains had been swallowed up by the great waters.

Cy Delamere was free!

"Goodbye, Timmy. Thanks for everything, my dear I shall never be able to repay you for all you've done for us."

"Goodbye, Suzanne. Look after yourself and that man of yours."

Their voices were shut out by the blast of revving jet engines from below the windows of the boarding ramp. Predictably, Cy had been called away to the telephone only minutes before they were due to leave for New York, and the plane had been held for them.

"That man of mine," she said, when all was quiet again, "has driven all the devils from my mind I'm a whole person possibly for the first time in my life Only "

"There's always an 'only,'" said Timmy Avery. "I have an 'only,' too What's yours, Suzanne?"

She said, "Only I haven't yet been able to get around to telling him about those hideous prints that Jock spread around

the place. And he must hear about them, or come across a set, sooner or later. The question is: do I tell him, or do I wait till they're thrust before his face?"

Avery pondered the question for a few moments, seeming to have his answer in the balance.

"Cy knows already," he said at length. "There was a set of prints waiting for him at the airport, sent there by Einskattle, the evening he got in from Quebec after the divorce hearing."

"Oh, *no!*" she breathed.

"He simply tore them up and threw them away without a word of comment," said Avery, "along with the note from your husband that was enclosed. This I know because I was here to meet him and saw it happen."

Cy came back, and as always when he put in an appearance, it was as if a charge of electricity had been released. "That was hot news from the firing line," he said. "Nadia Nielsen's been sacked from the board of Wessex-Seabright and the soft-liners, who are now in power, are advising their shareholders to accept our offer. I leave the details of the takeover in your capable hands, Timmy. We must go now. Goodbye, old chum." They shook hands.

Suzanne kissed Avery's cheek. "Don't worry too much about that 'only' of yours, Timmy," she whispered in his ear. "I checked up on your birth date in the perpetual calendar and you're a Thursday's child like me, with far to go. You'll find that not impossible she one day."

"Till then," said Avery. "I'll keep carrying the torch. 'Bye, Suzanne. Come back late or come back soon —but come back."

She broke from him and followed Cy through the plane's door, which was shut behind them by a cross-looking stewardess who cast an irate glance at her wristwatch.

Minutes later, mounting over southwest London, hand in hand, she thought, looking at the man by her side. You know the worst of me, and you've never faltered. That evening, after you arrived in from Quebec, tired, maybe, and suffering from jet lag, worrying about the divorce, at your lowest ebb, you were faced with the most searing test of your love for me, and there was never any doubt in your mind. You came straight to my arms, despoiled as you knew me to be.

How could I ever go wrong if I give my all, my everything, to you, my darling?

* * *

From New York, they flew to Hawaii. In New York had come news that Jock Einskattle had died from a cerebral hemorrhage in the private insane asylum where he had been taken directly from the divorce court, a direct result of his fall from the battlements that had been brought about by his maniac folly. The last of the Einskattles—so Suzanne was informed in a letter from the family lawyer—was to be laid to rest in the family mausoleum by the side of his mother, the Dowager Countess, who had died only days before her firstborn, and next to his brother, the Honorable Ian.

They were free to marry.

First, they would marry in New York. No—maybe that was not a good idea, for neither had any familial, emotional or other connections with the Jewel of the Hudson. So why not Hawaii, which would be colorful, to say the least?

In fact, the issue of where they were to marry was never seriously in doubt.

It was late afternoon when their harbor boat took them out to the moorings at Papeete: the end of siesta time, when the islanders bestir themselves for another night of tamaaraa and tamure, of lovemaking and song. The *Joseph Conrad*, freshly painted and elegant as a white swan, lay at her buoy near the outer mole.

Kim Teputo was nodding, half asleep against the mainmast. He struggled awake when he heard the sound of the approaching boat's engine. He sat up. Shaded his eyes against the dying sun. Cried out:

"Hey, Jean-Phillippe! Auguste! Anne-Marie! Helene! Look who's here!"

They all pattered up on deck: the girls knotting their sarongs about their hips; the boys prancing, waving, leaping over the side to seize hold of the incoming boat's prow and guide it cleanly alongside the white wall of the schooner.

"Hello, Jean Phillippe! Hello, Auguste! Hello, all . . ."

Home.

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